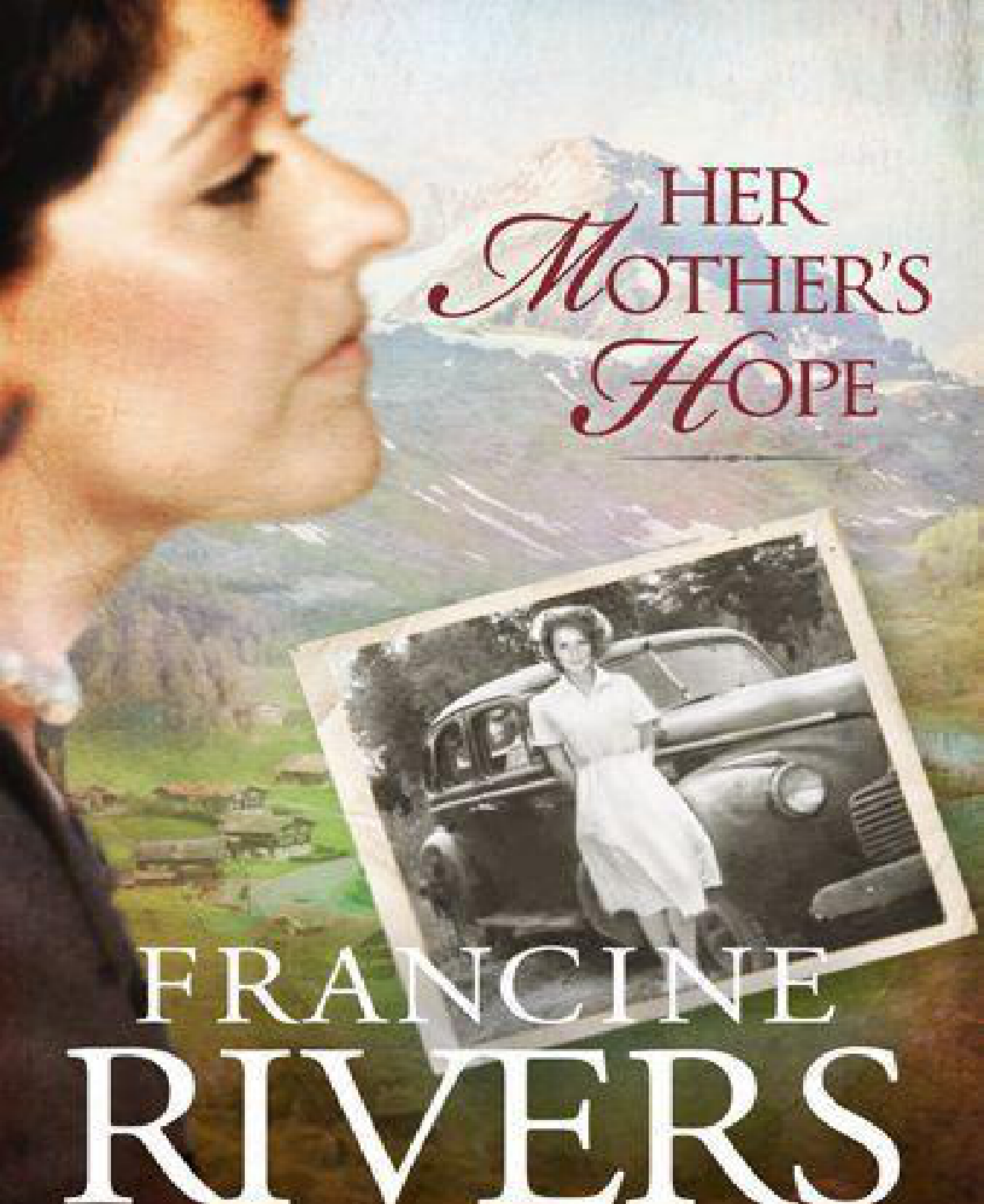
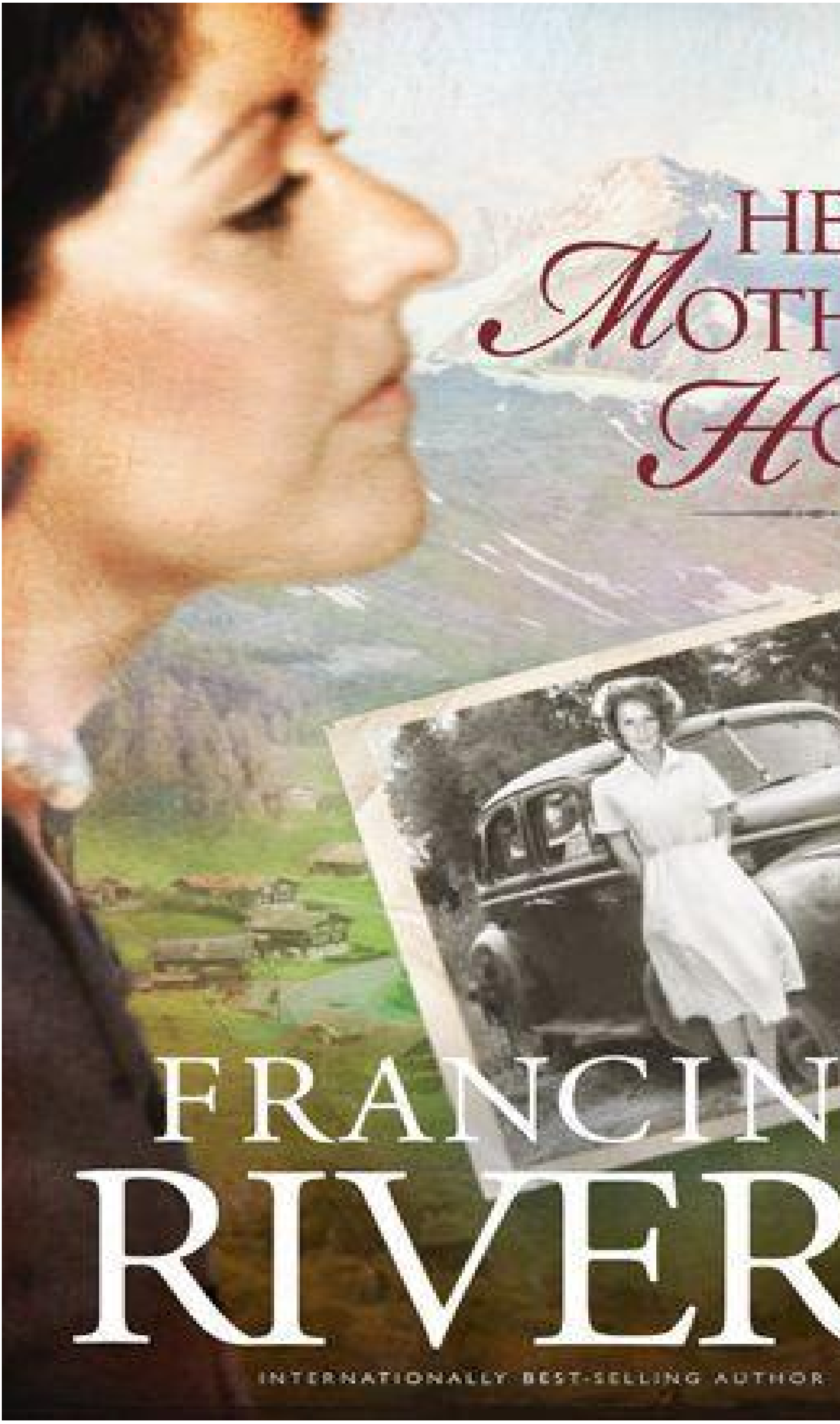
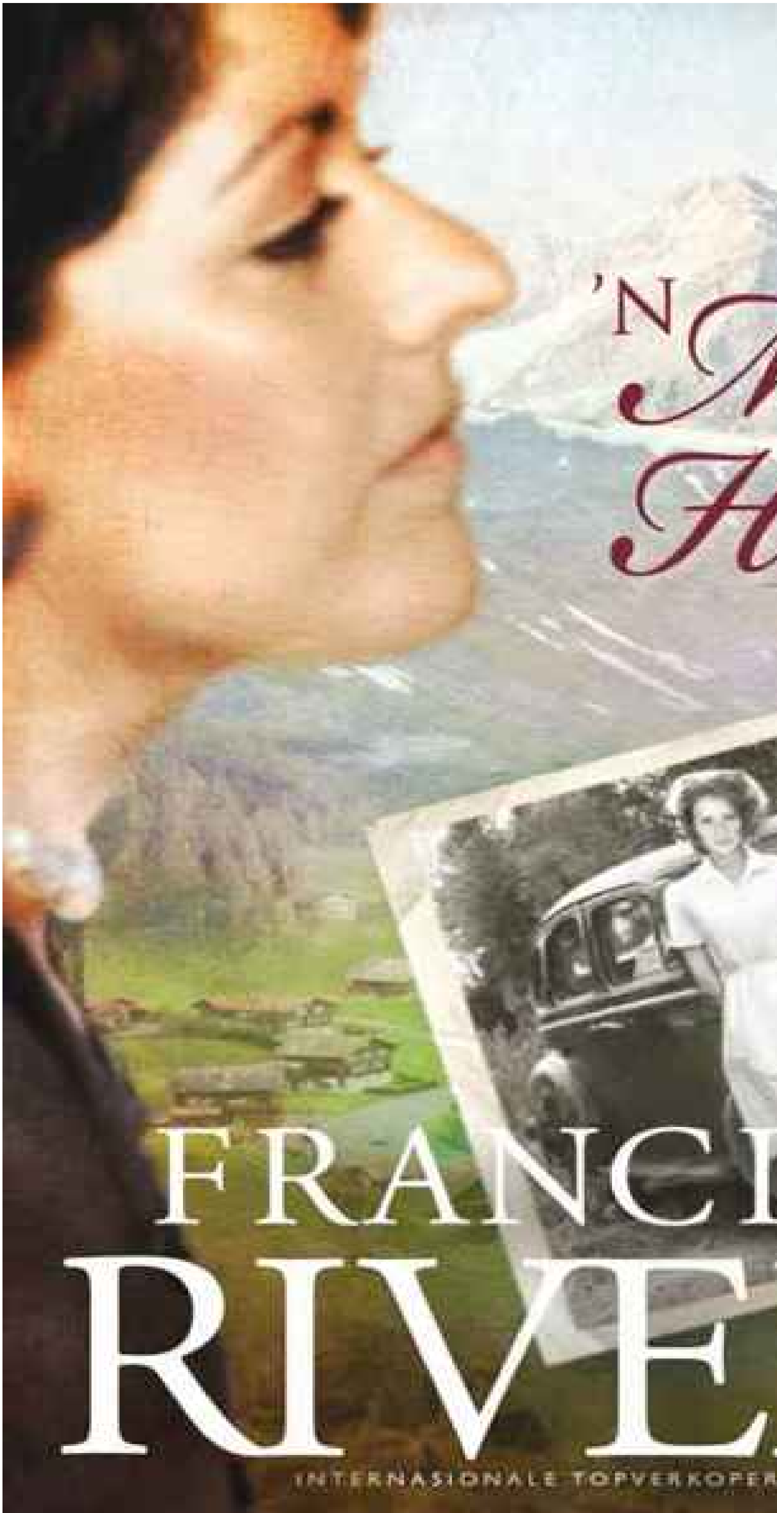

HER MOTHER'S HOPE
FRANCINE RIVERS
INTERNATIONALLY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

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*Her Mother's Hope*



Designed by Beth Sparkman

Edited by Kathryn S. Olson

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*Vir Shannon en Andrea*

## Acknowledgments

Most of the novel you are about to read is purely fictional, though there are bits and pieces of personal family history woven throughout. The manuscript has taken various forms over the last two years, and in the end morphed into a saga. Many people have helped me in the process of writing the stories of Marta and Hildemara in this first volume and Carolyn and May Flower Dawn in the second. I want to thank each and every one of them.

First of all my husband, Rick, has ridden the storm through this one, listening to every variation of the stories as the characters took form in my imagination and acting as my first editor.

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Holly's son, U.S. Army Lieutenant Daniel Harder, gave me information on the engineering and ROTC programs at Cal Poly. He is now on active duty. Our prayers are with him.

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Kurt Thiel and Robert Schwinn answered questions about InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Keep up the good work, gentlemen!

Globus tour guide Joppy Wissink rerouted a bus so that Rick and I had the opportunity to walk around my grandmother's hometown of Steffisburg, Switzerland.

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## Erkennings

Die grootste deel van hierdie verhaal is suiwer fiktief, alhoewel ek hier en daar stukkies van my eie familiegeskiedenis ingeweef het. Die manuskrip het die afgelope twee jaar verskeie vorme aangeneem en aan die einde in 'n saga gestalte gevind. Daar is baie mense wat my met die skryf van die verhale van Marta en Hildemara in hierdie eerste volume, en Carolyn en May Flower Dawn in die tweede gehelp het. Ek wil vir 'n ieder en 'n elk van hulle dankie sê.

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# Part One: Marta

# Chapter 1

**Steffisburg, Switzerland, 1901**

Marta usually loved Sundays. It was the only day Papa closed the tailor shop and Mama had a rest. The family dressed in their finest clothes and walked to church, Papa and Mama ahead, Marta's older brother, Hermann, behind them, and Marta and her younger sister, Elise, bringing up the rear. Usually other families joined them along the way. Marta would watch eagerly for her best friend, Rosie Gilgan, who'd run down the hill to join her and walk the rest of the way to the old Romanesque church with its arches mortared shut and the white clock tower.

Today, Marta hung her head, wishing she could run away and hide among the pines and alders while the townsfolk gathered for services. She could sit on her favorite fallen tree and ask God why Papa despised her so much and seemed so set on making her suffer. Today, she wouldn't have complained if Papa had told her to stay home and work in the shop alone and not step foot outside the door for a week, though it would take longer than that for the bruises to fade.

Despite evidence of the beating he had given her, Papa insisted everyone attend services. She wore a knitted cap and kept her chin down, hoping no one would notice. It wasn't the first time she had borne the marks of his anger. When people came close, Marta shifted the woolen scarf or turned her face away.

When they came into the churchyard, Papa sent Mama ahead with Elise and Hermann. He caught Marta by the elbow and spoke into her ear. "You'll sit in back."

"People will want to know why."

"And I'll tell them the truth. You're being punished for defying me." His fingers dug in painfully, but she refused to utter a sound of pain. "Keep your head down. No one wants to see your ugly face." He let go of her and went inside.

Fighting tears, Marta went in alone and stepped into the last row of straight-backed chairs.

She watched her father join Mama. When he glanced back, she tucked her chin quickly, looking up again only after he had seated himself. Her sister, Elise, looked back over her shoulder, face far too pale and strained for a child. Mama leaned close, whispering, and Elise turned face-forward again. Hermann sat between Mama and

Papa, his head turning to the right and left. No doubt he was looking for friends and would disappear as soon as the services ended.

Rosie passed by and sat near the front. The Gilgans had eight children and took up an entire row. Rosie glanced toward Marta's mother and father, then back. Marta hid behind Herr Becker, sitting in front of her. She waited briefly and peered around the baker again.

All the murmuring stopped when the minister stepped into the pulpit. He opened the service with prayer. Joining with the congregation, Marta said the prayer of confession, and she heard the minister's assurance of God's mercy and forgiveness. As the creed and Scriptures were read, Marta let her mind drift like the snow blowing across the Alpine meadows above Steffisburg. She imagined herself spreading her arms like wings and letting the white swirling flakes lift and carry her wherever God willed.

*And where would that be?* she wondered.

The minister's voice rose as he preached. He always said the same thing, but used different words, different examples from the Bible. *"Strive harder. Faith is dead without good works. Do not become complacent. Those who turn their backs on God are destined for hell."*

Was God like Papa, never satisfied no matter how hard she tried? Papa believed in God, but when had he ever shown her mercy? And if he believed God created everyone, then what right had Papa to complain over how tall she was, how thin, how white her skin, how large her hands and feet? Her father cursed her because she passed the school examinations "and made Hermann look a fool!"

She'd tried to defend herself. She should have known better. "Hermann doesn't apply himself. He'd rather hike in the hills than do his studies."

Papa came after her. Mama tried to get between, but he shoved her roughly aside. "You think you can talk to me like that and get away with it?" Marta raised her arm to protect herself, but it did no good.

"Johann, don't!" Mama cried out.

Still gripping Marta's arm, he turned on Mama. "Don't you tell me—"

"How many times must we turn the other cheek, Papa?" Something white-hot rose up inside Marta when he threatened Mama.

That's when he used his fist on her. He let go of her abruptly and stood over her. "She made me do it. You heard her! A father can't tolerate insolence in his own home!"

Marta didn't know she'd fainted until Mama stroked the hair back from her face. "Be still, Marta. Elise is getting a wet cloth." Marta could hear Elise crying. "Papa's gone to the tanner. He won't be back for a while." Mama took the cloth Elise held out. Marta sucked in her breath when Mama dabbed her split lip. "You shouldn't provoke your father."

"So it's my fault."

"I didn't say that."

"I pass the examination with the highest marks in school and get a beating for it. Where's Hermann? Strolling along on some mountain trail?"

Mama cupped her cheek. "You must forgive your father. He lost his temper. He didn't know what he was doing."

Mama always made excuses for him, just as Papa made excuses for Hermann. No one made excuses for her.

*"Forgive,"* Mama said. *"Seventy times seven. Forgive!"*

Marta's mouth twisted as the minister spoke of God the Father. She wished God was like Mama instead.

When the service ended, Marta waited until Papa motioned her to join the family. Head down, she fell into step beside Elise.

"Johann Schneider!"

Papa turned at Herr Gilgan's voice. The two men shook hands and talked. Hermann took advantage of the distraction to join some friends heading up the hill. Mama took Elise's hand when Frau Gilgan joined them.

"Where have you been all week?" Rosie spoke softly and Marta turned. Rosie gasped softly. "Oh, Marta." She moaned in sympathy. "Again? What was his reason this time?"

"School."

"But you passed the examination!"

"Hermann didn't."

"But that's not fair."

Marta lifted one shoulder and gave Rosie a bleak smile. "It does no good to tell him so." Rosie would never be able to understand. *Her* father adored her. Herr Gilgan adored all his children. They all worked together in the running of *Hotel Edelweiss*, encouraging one another in everything. They teased one another with good-natured humor, but never mocked or belittled anyone. If one of them had a difficulty, the others lovingly closed ranks around him and helped.

Sometimes Marta envied her friend. Every member of the Gilgan

family would finish school. The boys would serve their two years in the Swiss Army and then go off to university in Bern or Zurich. Rosie and her sisters would learn fine cuisine and the art of running a large household that embraced up to thirty outsiders. She would be tutored in French, English, and Italian. If Rosie had further aspirations, her father wouldn't deny her simply because she was a girl. He would send her to university along with her brothers.

"You've been in school long enough," Papa had declared when he came back from the tanner. "You're old enough to carry your share of the financial burden."

Begging him for one more year of school had done no good at all.

Tears filled Marta's eyes. "Papa said it's enough that I can read, write, and do arithmetic."

"But you're only twelve, and if anyone in our class should make it to the university, it would be you."

"There will be no university for me. Papa said I'm done with school."

"But why?"

"Papa says too much school fills a girl's head with nonsense." By *nonsense* Papa meant ambition. Marta burned with it. Marta had hoped that with enough schooling, she would have choices about what to do with her life. Papa said school had puffed her up and she needed to be brought down to where she belonged.

Rosie took Marta's hand. "Maybe he'll change his mind and let you come back to school. I'm sure Herr Scholz will want to talk to him about it."

Herr Scholz might try, but her father wouldn't listen. Once he made up his mind, not even an avalanche would change it. "It'll do no good, Rosie."

"What will you do now?"

"Papa plans to hire me out."

*"Marta!"*

Marta jumped at Papa's bellowing voice. Scowling, he motioned sharply for her to come. Rosie didn't let go of her hand as they joined their families.

Frau Gilgan stared at Marta. "What happened to your face?" She cast an angry look at Papa.

Papa stared back at her. "She fell down the stairs." Papa gave Marta a look of warning. "She's always been clumsy. Just look at those big hands and feet."

Frau Gilgan's dark eyes snapped. "She'll grow into them." Her husband put his hand beneath her elbow.

Mama held out her hand to Marta. "Come along. Elise is cold. We need to go home." Elise huddled close to Mama's side, not looking at anyone.

Rosie hugged Marta and whispered, "I'll ask Papa to hire you!"

Marta didn't dare hope her father would agree—he knew how much she would enjoy working for the Gilgans.

Papa went out that afternoon and didn't return home until late in the evening. He smelled of beer and seemed quite pleased with himself. "Marta!" He slapped his hand on the table. "I have found work for you."

She would work for the Beckers at the bakery every morning. "You must be there by four in the morning." She would spend three afternoons a week working for the Zimmers. The doctor thought his wife would welcome some freedom from tending their fractious new baby. "And Frau Fuchs says she can use you to tend her hives. It's getting colder, and she'll be ready to harvest the honey soon. You'll work nights as long as she needs you." He leaned back in his chair. "And you'll work at *Hotel Edelweiss* two days a week." He watched her face closely. "Don't think you're going to have tea and cookies with your little friend anymore. You're there to work. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa." Marta clasped her hands in front of her, trying not to show her pleasure.

"And don't ask for anything. Not from any of them. Herr Becker will pay in bread, Frau Fuchs in honey when the time comes. As to the others, they will settle with me and not you."

Heat spread through Marta's limbs, surging up her neck into her cheeks and burning there like lava beneath pale earth. "Am I to receive nothing, Papa? nothing at all?"

"You receive a roof over your head and food on your plate. You receive clothes on your back. As long as you live in my house, whatever you make rightfully belongs to me." He turned his head away. "Anna!" he shouted at Mama. "Are you done with that dress for Frau Keller yet?"

"I'm working on it now, Johann."

Scowling, Papa shouted again. "She expects delivery by the end of the week! If you don't have it ready by then, she'll take her business to another dressmaker!" Papa jerked his head. "Go help your mother."

Marta joined Mama by the fire. She had a box of colored threads

on the table at her side and black wool partially embroidered spread across her lap. She coughed violently into a cloth, folded and tucked it in her apron pocket before taking up her sewing again. Anyone could see by her pallor and the dark circles under her eyes that Mama wasn't well again. Mama had weak lungs. Tonight, her lips had a faint bluish tint. "Help your sister, Marta. She's developing another headache."

Elise had spent all evening on her sampler, brow furrowed over every stitch in pained concentration. Marta had helped her until Papa returned. About the only thing Elise could do well was hem, leaving Mama and Marta to do the fine embroidery work. Elise struggled as much as Hermann in school, though not for the same reasons. At ten, Elise could barely read and write. However, what she lacked in intellect and dexterity was overlooked because of her rare and delicate beauty. Mama's greatest pleasure took place every morning when she brushed and braided Elise's waist-length white-blonde hair. She had flawless alabaster skin and wide, angelic blue eyes. Papa asked nothing of her, taking pride in her beauty, acting sometimes as though he owned a priceless piece of art.

Marta worried about her sister. Papa might be right about suitors, but he didn't understand Elise's deep-seated fears. She had an almost-desperate dependence upon Mama and became hysterical when Papa went into one of his rages, though never in Elise's life had a hand been laid on her in anger. Papa would have an eye out for a settled man with money and position for Elise.

Marta prayed nightly that God would bless her sister with a husband who would cherish and protect her—and be rich enough to hire others to cook, clean, and raise the children! Elise would never be able to carry out such responsibilities.

Marta lifted a stool and set it beside her mother's chair. "Frau Keller always wants things done yesterday."

"She's a good customer." Mama laid a section of skirt carefully over Marta's lap so they could work on it together.

"*Good* is not a word I would use, Mama. The woman is a tyrant."

"It's not wrong to know what you want."

"If you're willing to pay for it." Marta fumed. Yes, Papa would ask Frau Keller to pay for the additional work, but Frau Keller would refuse. If Papa pressed, Frau Keller would become indignant "at such treatment" and threaten to take her business "to someone more appreciative of my generosity." She would remind Papa that she

ordered six dresses a year, and he should be thankful for her business in these hard times. Papa would apologize profusely, then add what he could to the amount Herr Keller owed for the suits Papa made him. And Papa often had to wait six months for even partial payment. No wonder the Kellers were rich. They clung to their money like lichen to rock. “If I were Papa, I’d demand a portion of the money before beginning the work, and full payment before any garment left the shop.”

Mama laughed softly. “So much fire from a twelve-year-old girl.”

Marta wondered how Mama would ever finish the skirt on time. She threaded a needle with pink silk and set to work on flower petals. “Papa has hired me out, Mama.”

Mama sighed. “I know, *Liebling*.” She quickly drew the cloth from her apron pocket to cover her mouth. When the spasm passed, she fought for breath as she pushed the cloth back into its hiding place.

“Your cough is getting worse.”

“I know. It comes from the years I worked in the cigar factory. It’ll get better when summer comes.” In summer, Mama could sit outside and work instead of sitting by a smoking fire.

“It never goes away completely, Mama. You should see the doctor.” Perhaps when Marta worked for Frau Zimmer, she might speak with the doctor about what could be done to help Mama.

“Let’s not worry about that now. Frau Keller must have her dress!”

* * *

Marta quickly became used to her work schedule. She got up while it was still dark, dressed quickly, and went up the street to the bakery. When Frau Becker let her in the front door, the room smelled of fresh baking bread. Marta went into the kitchen and chopped nuts for *Nusstorten* while Frau Becker stirred batter for *Schokoladenkuchen*.

“We’re making *Magenbrot* today,” Herr Becker announced as he stretched out a long snake of dough and cut it into small pieces. “Marta, dip those in butter and roll them in cinnamon and raisins, and then arrange them in the angel cake tins.”

Marta worked quickly, aware that both of the Beckers watched her. Frau Becker poured the dark batter into cake forms and handed the wooden spoon to Marta. “Go ahead. Lick it clean.”

Herr Becker laughed. “Ah, see how the girl can smile, Fanny.” He punched dough down. “You learn quickly, Marta.” He winked at his wife. “We’ll have to teach her how to make Epiphany cakes this

coming Christmas. *Ja?*"

"And *Lebkuchen*." Frau Becker winked at Marta. Mama loved the spicy gingerbread. "And *Marzipan*." Frau Becker took the spoon and tossed it into the sink. "I'll teach you how to make *Butterplätzchen*." She set butter, flour, and sugar on the worktable. "And tomorrow, I'll teach you how to make anise cookies."

When the bakery opened for business, Frau Becker gave Marta two breakfast loaves as payment. "You're a good worker."

Marta took the bread to Mama and had a bowl of *Müsli*. After doing her chores and eating an early lunch, she headed down the road past the schoolhouses to the doctor's house.

Frau Zimmer looked distressed when she opened the door. "Here! Take him!" She thrust her screaming baby into Marta's arms and grabbed her shawl. "I'm going to visit a friend." She slipped around Marta and headed off without a backward glance.

Marta went inside and closed the door so people wouldn't hear the baby wailing. She paced, singing hymns. When that didn't calm little Evrard, she tried rocking him. She checked his diaper. Finally, exasperated, she put him down on the rug. "Go ahead and scream your head off."

The baby stopped crying and rolled onto his stomach. Arching his back, he reached his arms out and kicked his feet. Marta laughed. "You just wanted a little freedom, didn't you?" She collected scattered toys and dropped them in front of him. He kicked his legs harder, gurgling in delight. He squealed, his hands opening and closing. "Reach for it! I'm not giving it to you." He managed to scoot a few inches and grasp a rattle. Marta clapped. "Good for you, Evrard!" He rolled onto his back.

When little Evrard wore himself out, Marta picked him up and rocked him to sleep. Frau Zimmer came in an hour later, looking refreshed. She stopped and listened, looking somewhat alarmed. "Is he all right?" She hurried over to the crib and peered in. "He's sleeping! He never sleeps in the afternoon. What did you do?"

"I let him play on the rug. He tried to crawl."

The following afternoon, Marta went up the hill to *Hotel Edelweiss*, where Frau Gilgan put her to work stripping beds and remaking them with fresh mattress sheets and duvets for the feather beds. Fluffing them full of air, she rolled them on the end of the bed, then took the laundry downstairs to the wash room. Frau Gilgan worked with her, sharing amusing stories of past guests. "Of course,

you have some who are not pleased with anything you do and others who break their legs skiing."

Two of Rosie's older sisters manned the washtubs and kept great pots of water boiling on the woodstove. Marta's arms ached from stirring linen; pushing sheets and duvets down, around, and over; spreading folds; and stirring again. Kristen, the older girl, hooked a sheet and dragged it up, folding and wringing it into tight ropes, letting the water cascade back into the washtub. Then she shook the sheet out into a tub of steaming rinse water.

Snowflakes caught on the window frames, but perspiration dripped from Marta's face. She blotted it away with her sleeve.

"Oh!" Frau Gilgan came over and held out her hands, strong and square, reddened and callused from years of washing. "Let me see your hands, Marta." Frau Gilgan turned Marta's hands palms up and clucked her tongue. "Blisters. I should not have worked you so hard on your first day, but you didn't complain. Your hands will be so sore you won't be able to make a stitch."

"But there's a whole pile of sheets yet to do."

Frau Gilgan put her fists on her ample hips and laughed. "*Ja*, and that's why I have daughters." She put her arm around Marta. "Go on upstairs. Rosie will be back from school by now. She'll want to have tea with you before you leave. And if you've time, she needs help with geography."

Marta said she'd be delighted.

Rosie jumped from her chair. "Marta! I forgot you started work today. I'm so glad you're here! I missed you at school. It's not the same without you. No one to answer Herr Scholz's difficult questions."

"Your mother says you need help with your geography."

"Oh, not now. I've so much to tell you. Let's go for a walk."

Marta knew she'd have to listen to the latest escapades of Arik Brechtwald. Rosie had been in love with him since the day he fished her out of a creek. It did no good to remind her Arik had caused the fall in the first place. He'd dared her to cross the Zulg. She'd made it halfway across when she slipped on a rock and slithered down over a small waterfall before Arik could catch hold of her. He'd lifted her out and carried her to the bank. Ever since then, Arik had been Rosie's knight in shining armor.

Snow sifted softly from the clouds overhead, adding thickness to the blanket of white over Steffisburg. Smoke curled up like ghostly fingers from chimneys, dissipating in the chill afternoon air. While

Rosie chattered on gaily, Marta trudged along beside her. White drifts covered the Alpine meadow, which would in a few months turn verdant green with splashes of red, yellow, and blue blossoms tempting and nourishing Frau Fuchs's bees. Rosie brushed snow off a log and sat where they could look down on *Hotel Edelweiss* and Steffisburg below. If the day had been clear, they could have seen *Schloss Thun* and the *Thunersee* like a sheet of gray glass.

Today, low clouds made the sun look like a white, blurred ball ready to bounce off the mountains beyond Interlaken.

Marta's breath made steam. Tears welled up as she listened to Rosie's musings about Arik. Her friend didn't have a care in the world other than whether Arik liked her or not. Pressing her mouth tight, Marta tried not to feel jealous. Maybe Papa was right. She and Rosie would be friends for a little while longer, and then their different situations would build a wall between them. Marta worked for the Gilgans now. She wasn't the friend who came to call or have tea or sit and chat while Rosie's mother put out anise cookies on a silver platter and hot chocolate in fine porcelain cups. Everything was about to change, and Marta couldn't bear it.

Now that Papa had removed her from school, she would only be qualified to be a servant or tend someone's fractious baby. She could help Mama with dressmaking, but Mama made so little money when one considered how many hours she worked for women like Frau Keller, who expected perfection for a pittance. And Mama never saw a franc of what she made. Papa held the purse strings and complained bitterly about how little they had, though he always managed to find enough for beer.

Rosie put her arm around Marta's shoulders. "Don't look so sad."

Marta stood abruptly and moved away. "Herr Scholz was going to teach me French. I could've continued with Latin. If I knew even one more language, I might be able to find a decent job someday in a nice shop in Interlaken. If my father has his way, I'll never be more than a servant." As soon as the bitter words poured out, shame filled her. How could she say such things to Rosie? "I'm not ungrateful to your parents. Your mother was so kind to me today. . . ."

"They love you like a daughter."

"Because you've loved me like a sister."

"That's not going to change just because you're not in school. I wish I could quit. I'd rather stay home and help my mother than try to cram facts into my head."

“Oh, Rosie.” Marta covered her face. “I would’ve given anything to stay, through high school at least.”

“I could give you books.”

“I’ve no time now. Papa’s seen to that.” Marta stared off at the cloud-shrouded mountains that stood like prison walls. Her father intended to keep her captive. She was stronger and healthier than Mama. She could learn faster than Hermann or Elise. Hermann would go off to university. Elise would marry. Marta would be kept at home. After all, someone would have to do the work when Mama couldn’t.

“I have to go home. I need to help Mama.”

As they walked down the hill, Rosie took Marta’s hand. “Maybe when Hermann makes it into high school, your father will allow you to come back to school.”

“Hermann will fail again. He has no head for books.” At least, the next time, Papa would not be able to blame her.

## *Marta*

# Hoofstuk 1

## Steffisburg, Switserland, 1901

Sondae was nog altyd Marta se gunsteling dag. Dit is die enigste dag waarop Pappa die snyerswinkel sluit en Mamma kan rus. Die gesin trek op hulle mooiste aan en loop kerk toe. Pappa en Mamma loop voor, Marta se ouer broer, Hermann, loop agter hulle en Marta en haar jonger sussie, Elise, vorm die agterhoede. Gewoonlik is daar ander gesinne wat langs die pad by hulle aansluit. En Rosie Gilgan, Marta se beste vriendin, wat teen die heuwel afgehardloop kom en saam met haar die res van die pad na die ou Romaanse kerk met sy wit kloktoring stap.

Maar vandag is Marta baie verleë en sy wens sy kon weghardloop en tussen die els- en dennebome gaan wegkruip terwyl die dorpsmense kerk hou. Sy sou op haar gunsteling omgevalle boom kon gaan sit en die Here vra waarom Pappa haar so haat en die lewe so swaar vir haar maak. Vandag sou sy nie gekla het as Pappa gesê het sy moet by die huis bly en alleen in die winkel werk en die hele week binne bly nie. Al sou die kneusplekke langer as dit neem om weg te gaan.

Ondanks die bewyse dat hy haar geslaan het, dring Pappa daarop aan dat almal kerk toe gaan. Sy dra ’n gebreide kappie en kyk die hele tyd af en hoop maar dat niemand sal sien nie. Dit is nie die eerste keer dat sy die tekens van sy woede dra nie. Wanneer mense naby kom, trek sy haar serp reg of draai haar gesig weg.

Toe hulle by die kerk aankom, stuur Pappa vir Mamma saam met Elise en Hermann vooruit. Hy hou Marta aan haar elmboog terug en sê in haar oor. “Jy sit agter.”

“Die mense sal wil weet hoekom.”

“En ek sal vir hulle sê jy word gestraf omdat jy nie na my luister nie.” Sy vingers maak haar seer, maar sy weier om ’n geluid te maak. “En kyk af. Niemand wil in jou lelike gesig vaskyk nie.” Hy los haar en

gaan in.

Marta baklei teen haar trane toe sy alleen ingaan en by die laaste ry regop stoele inskuif.

Sy kyk hoe Pappa by Mamma aansluit. Toe hy omkyk, kyk sy vinnig af en kyk eers weer op toe hy gaan sit het. Haar sussie, Elise, kyk oor haar skouer, haar gesig heeltemal te bleek en gespanne vir ’n kind. Mamma leun oor, fluister, en Elise draai weer vorentoe. Hermann sit tussen Mamma en Pappa en kyk heen en weer. Hy is tien teen een op die uitkyk vir sy vriende en sal verdwyn sodra die kerk uitkom.

Rosie loop verby en gaan sit in een van die voorste rye. Die Gilgans het agt kinders en sit ’n hele ry vol. Rosie loer in die rigting van Marta se ma en pa en draai dan vorentoe. Marta sit weggekruip agter Herr Becker voor haar. Sy wag ’n oomblik voordat sy weer oor die bakker se skouer kyk.

Die gedempte stemme raak stil toe die predikant sy plek op die preekstoel inneem. Hy open die diens met ’n gebed. Nadat Marta saam met die res van die gemeente die skuldbelydenis opgesê het, hoor sy die predikant se versekering van God se genade en vergifnis. Terwyl die geloofsbelydenis en teksgedeelte voorgelees word, dwarrel Marta se gedagtes soos die sneeu wat oor die Alpe bokant Steffisburg waai. Sy voel hoe sy haar arms soos vlerke sprei en die wit dwarreling van vlokkies haar oplig en dra na waar die Here ook al wil.

*En waar sou dit wees?* wonder sy.

Die predikant praat al hoe harder deur die loop van die preek. Hy sê altyd dieselfde goed, maar gebruik ander woorde, ander voorbeelde uit die Bybel. “*Strewe na meer. ’n Geloof sonder werke is dood. Moenie oorgerus raak nie. Dié wat hulle rug op die Here draai, is vir die hel bestem.*”

Is die Here soos Pappa, nooit tevrede nie, maak nie saak hoe hard sy probeer nie? Pappa glo in God, maar wanneer het hy al ooit aan haar genade bewys? En as hy glo dat die Here almal gemaak het, watter reg het Pappa om te kla oor hoe lank sy is, hoe maer, hoe wit haar vel, hoe groot haar hande en voete? Haar pa raas met haar omdat sy haar toetse slaag “en Hermann soos ’n dwaas laat lyk”.

Sy het probeer om haarself te verdedig, maar sy moes van beter geweet het. “Hermann leer nie. Hy vaar eerder die berg in as om sy huiswerk te doen.”

Pappa het haar beetgekry. Mamma het tussenbeide getree, maar hy het haar weggestamp. “Dink jy jy kan so met my praat en daarmee wegkom?” Marta het met haar arm probeer keer, maar dit het nie

gehelp nie.

“Johann, moenie!” het Mamma uitgeroep.

Hy het na Mamma gedraai. “Moenie vir my sê – ”

“Hoeveel keer moet ons die ander wang draai, Pappa?” Iets witwarm het in Marta opgestaan toe hy Mamma gedreig het.

Dis toe dat hy haar met die vuis geslaan het. Hy het haar skielik gelos en bo haar uitgetroon. “Sy het hiervoor gevra. Jy het haar gehoor! ’n Pa kan net soveel onbeskoftheid in sy eie huis verdra!”

Marta het nie geweet dat sy flou geword het voordat Mamma haar hare uit haar gesig gevee het nie. “Lê stil, Marta. Elise het ’n nat lappie gaan haal.” Marta kon Elise hoor huil. “Pappa is na die kroeg toe. Hy sal eers later terugkom.” Mamma het die lappie by Elise gevat. Marta het na haar asem gesnak toe Mamma haar stukkende lip daarmee klad. “Jy moenie jou pa aanleiding gee nie.”

“Bedoel Mamma dis my skuld?”

“Dis nie wat ek sê nie.”

“Ek slaag met die beste punte in die skool en kry ’n pak slae daarvoor. Waar is Hermann? Iewers op ’n verkenningstog in die berg?”

Mamma kelk haar hand om Marta se wang. “Jy moet jou pa vergewe. Hy het sy humeur verloor. Hy het nie geweet wat hy doen nie.”

Mamma maak altyd verskoning vir hom, net soos Pappa vir Hermann verskoning maak. Niemand maak verskoning vir haar nie.

“*Vergewe*,” sê Mamma. “*70 maal sewe. Vergewe*!”

Marta voel haar mond vertrek terwyl die predikant van God die Vader praat. Sy wens God was eerder soos Mamma.

Aan die einde van die diens wag Marta totdat Pappa beduie dat sy by die gesin moet aansluit. Kop onderstebo val sy langs Elise in.

“Johann Schneider!”

Pappa draai toe Herr Gilgan roep. Die twee mans skud hand en gesels. Hermann benut sy kans om saam met ’n paar vriende na die berg koers te kry. Mamma neem Elise aan die hand toe Frau Gilgan by hulle kom aansluit.

“Waar was jy die hele week?” Rosie praat sag en Marta draai na haar. Rosie snak sag na haar asem. “Ag, Marta.” Sy kreun simpatiek. “Weer? Hoekom hierdie keer?”

“Skool.”

“Maar jy het geslaag!”

“Hermann het nie.”

“Maar dis nie regverdig nie.”

Marta lig haar een skouer en glimlag flou. “Dit help nie om dit vir hom te sê nie.” Rosie sal nooit kan verstaan nie. Háár pa is mal oor haar. Herr Gilgan is mal oor al sy kinders. Hulle almal is betrokke by die bestuur van Hotel Edelweiss, en hulle spoor mekaar in alles aan. Daar is ’n goedige geterg, maar niemand word ooit gespot of verkleineer nie. As een van hulle ’n probleem het, help die ander hom waar hulle kan.

Soms beny Marta haar vriendin. Al die Gilgan-kinders sal hulle skoolloopbaan voltooi. Die seuns sal hulle twee jaar in die Switserse weermag voltooi en dan in Bern of Zürich gaan studeer. Rosie en haar susters sal in die fynere kookkuns opgelei word en leer hoe om ’n groot huishouding te bestuur. Sy sal Franse, Engelse en Italiaanse klasse ontvang. As Rosie verdere aspirasies het, sal haar pa dit nie van haar weerhou bloot omdat sy ’n meisie is nie. Hy sal haar saam met haar broers universiteit toe stuur.

“Jy was lank genoeg op skool,” het Pappa aangekondig toe hy van die kroeg af teruggekom het. “Jy is oud genoeg om jou deel van die finansiële las te dra.”

Sy het vergeefs vir nog ’n jaar op skool gesmeek.

Marta voel hoe haar oë vol trane word. “Pappa sê dis genoeg dat ek kan lees, skryf en somme doen.”

“Maar jy is net 12 en as enigiemand in ons klas dit tot op universiteit sal maak, is dit jy.”

“Daar sal geen universiteit vir my wees nie. Pappa het gesê ek’s klaar met skool.”

“Maar hoekom?”

“Pappa sê te veel skool maak ’n meisie se kop vol twak.” Met “twak” bedoel Pappa ambisie. Dit brand in Marta. Marta het gehoop dat sy met genoeg geleerdheid sal kan besluit wat sy met haar lewe wil maak. Pappa sê skool maak haar hoogmoedig en dat sy teruggebring moet word na waar sy hoort.

Rosie neem Marta se hand. “Dalk sal hy van plan verander en jou weer laat skool toe kom. Ek is seker Herr Scholz sal met hom daaroor wil praat.”

Herr Scholz kan probeer, maar haar pa sal nie luister nie. As hy eers op ’n ding besluit het, sal nie eens ’n sneeustorting hom daarvan laat afsien nie. “Dit sal nie help nie, Rosie.”

“Wat gaan jy nou doen?”

“Pappa is van plan om my dienste te verhuur.”

“Marta!”

Marta wip. Pappa frons toe hy ongeduldig wys sy moet nou kom. Rosie hou haar hand vas totdat hulle by hulle gesinne is.

Frau Gilgan kyk stip na Marta. “Wat het met jou gesig gebeur?” Sy kyk kwaai in Pappa se rigting.

Pappa kyk haar terug in die oë. “Sy het by die trappe afgeval.” Pappa kyk waarskuwend na Marta. “Sy was nog altyd lomp. Kyk net na daardie groot hande en voete.”

Frau Gilgan se donker oë flits. “Sy gaan in hulle ingroei.” Haar man plaas sy hand onder haar elmboog.

Mamma steek haar hand na Marta toe uit. “Kom, Marta. Elise kry koud. Ons moet huis toe gaan.” Elise staan styf langs Mamma en kyk na niemand nie.

Rosie gee Marta ’n drukkie. “Ek sal Pappa vra om vir jou werk te gee.”

Marta durf nie hoop dat haar pa sal instem nie – hy weet hoe sy dit sal geniet om vir die Gilgans te werk.

Pappa gaan laatmiddag uit en kom eers laat die aand terug. Hy ruik na bier en lyk heel ingenome met homself. “Marta!” Hy klap op die tafel. “Ek het vir jou werk gekry.”

Sy sal elke oggend vir die Beckers by die bakkery werk. “Jy moet vieruur soggens daar wees.” Sy sal drie middae ’n week vir die Zimmers werk. Die dokter en sy vrou sal ’n ruskans verwelkom. “En Frau Fuchs sê sy kan jou gebruik om met die korwe te help. Dit word kouer en sy sal binnekort kan heuning uithaal. Dit beteken dat jy ook aande sal werk solank sy jou nodig het.” Hy leun agteroor op sy stoel “En jy sal twee dae ’n week by Edelweiss Hotel werk.” Hy hou haar stip dop. “Moenie dink dat jy saam met jou klein maatjie gaan tee drink en koekies eet nie. Jy is daar om te werk. Hoor jy my?”

“Ja, Pappa.” Marta klem haar hande voor haar saam en probeer om nie haar blydskap te wys nie.

“En moenie vir enigiets vra nie. Nie van enige van hulle nie. Herr Becker sal in brood betaal, Frau Fuchs in heuning wanneer die tyd kom. En die ander sal met my regmaak, nie met jou nie.”

Die hitte versprei deur Marta se ledemate, stoot op tot in haar wange en brand daar soos lawa onder die aardoppervlak. “Gaan ek dan niks kry nie, Pappa? Nie ’n sent nie?”

“Jy kry ’n dak oor jou kop en kos in jou bord. Jy kry klere. Solank jy in my huis is, behoort alles wat jy inbring aan my.” Hy kyk weg. “Anna!” gil hy vir Mamma. “Is jy al klaar met daardie rok vir Frau

Keller?"

"Ek is nou besig daarmee, Johann."

Pappa frons toe hy weer bulder. "Sy verwag dit teen die einde van die week! As jy dan nog nie klaar is nie, gaan sy vir haar 'n ander kleremaakster kry!" Pappa wys met sy kop. "Gaan help jou ma."

Marta gaan sit by Mamma voor die vuur. Sy het 'n boksie kleurvolle gare op die tafel langs haar en die stuk swart materiaal op haar skoot is gedeeltelik geborduur. Sy hoes kwaai in 'n sakdoek, vou dit op en druk dit in haar voorskootsak voordat sy haar naaldwerk hervat. Enigiemand kan aan haar bleekheid en die donker kringe onder haar oë sien dat Mamma weer nie gesond is nie. Mamma het swak longe. Vanaand is daar 'n effense blouerige tint op haar lippe. "Help jou sussie, Marta. Sy is weer besig om hoofpyn te kry."

Elise het die hele aand aan haar borduurlap gewerk en elke steek met 'n frons van pynlike konsentrasie gemaak. Marta het haar gehelp totdat Pappa haar geroep het. Elise kan omtrent net some insit, en Marta en Mamma doen gewoonlik die fyn borduurwerk. Elise sukkel net soveel soos Hermann op skool, maar nie om dieselfde redes nie. Op tien kan Elise skaars lees en skryf. Waar dit haar egter aan intellek en knaphandigheid ontbreek, is sy met 'n seldsame en delikate skoonheid geseën. Dit gee Mamma elke oggend die grootste genot om Elise se lang witblonde hare te borsel en te vleg. Sy het 'n vlekkelose wit vel en groot, engelagtige blou oë. Pappa verwag niks van haar nie. Dis asof hy sy trots in haar skoonheid stel en hy tree soms op asof hy 'n onbekostigbare kunswerk besit.

Marta is bekommerd oor haar sussie. Pappa is dalk reg oor voornemende kêrels, maar hy verstaan nie haar diepgewortelde vrese nie. Sy het 'n amper desperate afhanklikheid van Mamma en word histeries wanneer Pappa in een van sy woedebuie ontplof, al is daar nog nooit in haar lewe 'n hand teen Elise gelig nie. Pappa sal op die uitkyk wees vir 'n man met geld en status vir Elise.

Marta bid elke aand dat die Here haar sussie met 'n man sal seën wat haar sal koester en beskerm – een wat ryk genoeg is om ander mense te huur om kos te maak, skoon te maak en die kinders groot te maak. Elise sal nooit daardie verantwoordelikhede kan behartig nie.

Marta gaan haal 'n stoel en kom sit dit langs haar ma s'n neer. "Frau Keller wil dinge altyd gister gedoen hê."

"Sy is 'n goeie klant." Mamma sit 'n gedeelte van die romp versigtig oor Marta se skoot sodat hulle saam daaraan kan werk.

"*Goeie* is nie 'n woord wat ek sou gebruik nie, Mamma. Die vrou is

’n tiran.”

“Dit is nie verkeerd om te weet wat jy wil hê nie.”

“As jy bereid is om daarvoor te betaal.” Marta is siedend. Ja, Pappa sal Frau Keller vra om vir die ekstra werk te betaal, maar Frau Keller sal weier. As Pappa daarop aandring, sal Frau Keller met verontwaardiging oor “hierdie soort behandeling” kla en dreig om haar sake na iemand toe te neem “wat my gulhartigheid waardeer”. Sy sal Pappa daarop wys dat sy ses rokke ’n jaar bestel, en dat hy in hierdie swaar tye dankbaar behoort te wees vir haar besigheid. Pappa sal oordadig verskoning maak en Herr Keller dan soveel moontlik vra vir die pakke wat Pappa vir hom maak. Pappa moet dikwels tot ses maande vir ’n gedeeltelike betaling wag. Dis geen wonder dat die Kellers so ryk is nie. Hulle klou aan hulle geld soos mos aan ’n rots. “As ek Pappa was, sou ek op ’n gedeelte van die geld aangedring het voordat ek begin werk, en die res van die geld voordat enige kledingstuk die winkel verlaat.”

Mamma lag sag. “Soveel vuur van ’n twaalfjarige meisie.”

Marta weet nie hoe Mamma die romp ooit betyds gaan klaar hê nie. Sy ryg pienk sygare deur ’n naald en begin aan die blomblare werk. “Pappa het gesê ek moet gaan werk, Mamma.”

Mamma sug. “Ek weet, *Liebling*.” Sy haal die lap haastig uit haar voorskootsak en hou dit voor haar mond. Toe die hoesbui verby is, hyg sy na asem terwyl sy die sakdoek weer in sy wegsteekplek druk.

“Mamma se hoes word erger.”

“Ek weet. Dis van al die jare wat ek in die sigaarfabriek gewerk het. Dit sal beter wees as dit weer somer word.” In die somer kan Mamma buite sit en werk in plaas van langs ’n rokende vuur.

“Dit gaan nooit heeltemal weg nie, Mamma. Mamma moet by ’n dokter uitkom.” Wanneer Marta vir Frau Zimmer werk, kan sy dalk met die dokter praat oor wat gedoen kan word om Mamma te help.

“Ons kan ons nie nou daaroor bekommer nie. Frau Keller moet haar rok kry!”

***

Marta is gou gewoond aan haar werkrooster. Sy staan op wanneer dit nog donker is, trek vinnig aan en loop na die bakkery bo in die straat. Wanneer Frau Becker haar by die voordeur inlaat, ruik die vertrek na vars brood. Marta gaan kombuis toe waar sy die neute vir die

*Nusstorten* rooster terwyl Frau Becker die deeg vir die *Schokoladenkuchen* berei.

"Vandag maak ons *Magenbrot*," verklaar Herr Becker terwyl hy die deeg in 'n lang slang uitrol en dit in kleiner stukkies sny. "Marta, doop hulle in botter voordat jy hulle in die kaneel en rosyntjies rol. Dan kan jy hulle in die engelkoek-panne rangskik."

Marta werk vinnig, bewus daarvan dat albei Beckers haar dophou. Frau Becker gooi die donker deeg in koekvorms en gee die houtlepel vir Marta. "Nou toe. Lek maar af."

Herr Becker lag. "Ai, kyk hoe kan die kind glimlag, Fanny." Hy begin knie. "Jy leer vinnig, Marta." Hy knipoog vir sy vrou. "Ons sal haar hierdie Kersfees moet leer om epifanie-koeke te bak. *Ja?*"

"En *Lebkuchen*." Frau Becker knipoog vir Marta. Mamma is so lief vir die speseryagtige gemmerbrood. "En marsepein." Frau Becker neem die lepel en sit dit in die wasbak. "Ek sal jou leer hoe om *feines Buttergebäck* te maak." Sy sit die botter, meel en suiker op die werktafel neer. "En môre gaan ek jou leer hoe om anyskoekies te bak."

Wanneer die bakkery later oopmaak vir besigheid, gee Frau Becker vir haar twee brode as betaling. "Jy is 'n goeie werker."

Marta neem die brood na Mamma toe en eet 'n bakkie *Müsli*. Nadat sy haar huiswerk gedoen het en 'n vroeë middagete gehad het, loop sy verby die skool na die dokter se huis laer af in die straat.

Frau Zimmer lyk oorstuur toe sy die deur oopmaak. "Hier! Vat hom!" Sy druk haar skreeuende baba in Marta se arms en gryp haar sjaal. "Ek gaan by 'n vriendin kuier." Sy skuur verby Marta en loop sonder om een maal terug te kyk.

Marta gaan in en maak die deur toe sodat ander mense die kind nie sal hoor huil nie. Sy loop op en af en sing vir die kind. Toe dit die klein Evrard nie kalmeer nie, probeer sy hom wieg. Sy kyk of sy doek droog is. Uiteindelik sit sy hom ergerlik op die mat neer. "Nou toe, skreeu tot jy blou is."

Die baba hou op huil en draai op sy maag. Hy krom sy ruggie, strek sy arms voor hom uit en skop. Marta lag. "Jy het net 'n bietjie vryheid gesoek, nè?" Sy tel van die speelgoed op wat rondlê en sit hulle voor hom neer. Hy skop harder en kraai van plesier. Hy gee 'n gilletjie en maak sy handjies oop en toe. "Tel dit op! Ek gaan dit nie vir jou gee nie." Hy slaag daarin om 'n paar sentimeter te vorder en gryp 'n ratel. Marta klap hande. "Mooi, Evrard!" Hy draai op sy ruggie.

Toe klein Evrard klaar gespeel het, tel Marta hom op en sus hom aan die slaap. Toe Frau Zimmer 'n uur later terugkom, lyk sy verfris.

Sy steek vas en luister. “Is alles reg?” Sy haas haar na sy bedjie en kyk in. “Hy slaap! Hy slaap nooit in die middag nie. Wat het jy gedoen?”

“Ek het hom op die mat laat speel. Hy het probeer kruip.”

Die volgende middag loop sy die heuwel uit na Hotel Edelweiss waar Frau Gilgan haar in die werk steek. Nadat sy al die beddegoed afgehaal het, maak sy die beddens met skoon lakens en vereduvets op. Sy pof hulle vol lug en rol hulle aan die voetenent van die bed op. Dan neem sy die wasgoed af na die waskamer toe. Frau Gilgan werk saam met haar en tussendeur vertel sy amusante stories van vorige gaste. “Daar is natuurlik sommige wat met niks tevrede is nie en ander wat hulle bene teen die ski-hellings breek.”

Twee van Rosie se ouer susters beman die wasbalies en hou groot potte water aan die kook op die houtstoof. Marta se arms pyn later van die linne roer, die lakens en duvets in die water afdruk en invou, die voue uitstryk, en dan weer roer. Kristen, die ouer meisie, diep ’n laken op, trek dit uit die water, wring dit in ’n stywe koord sodat die water in die wasbalie terugstort. Dan laat sak sy die laken in ’n balie stomende spoelwater.

Die sneeuvlokkies versamel op die vensterrame, maar die sweet loop teen Marta se gesig af. Sy vee met haar mou oor haar gesig.

“Ai!” Frau Gilgan kom met uitgestrekte hande nader. Hulle is sterk en bonkig, rooi en vereelt van jare se waswerk. “Wys my jou hande, Marta.” Frau Gilgan draai Marta se palms boontoe en klik met haar tong. “Blase. Ek moes jou nie so hard op jou eerste dag laat werk het nie, maar jy het nie gekla nie. Jou hande gaan so seer wees dat jy nie ’n steek sal kan werk nie.”

“Maar daar is nog ’n hele stapel lakens om te doen.”

Frau Gilgan plant haar vuiste op haar robuuste heupe en lag. “Ja, en dis waarom ek dogters het.” Sy sit haar arm om Marta se skouer. “Gaan boontoe. Rosie sal teen hierdie tyd al van die skool af wees. Sy sal saam met jou wil tee drink voordat jy loop. En as jy tyd het, kan jy haar met haar Aardrykskunde help.”

Marta sê dat dit vir haar ’n plesier sal wees.

Rosie spring uit haar stoel. “Marta! Ek het vergeet dat jy vandag begin werk het. Ek is so bly jy’s hier! Ek het jou by die skool gemis. Dis net nie dieselfde sonder jou nie. Daar is niemand wat Herr Scholz se moeilike vrae kan antwoord nie.”

“Jou ma sê ek moet jou met jou Aardrykskunde help.”

“Nie nou nie. Ek het soveel om jou te vertel. Kom ons gaan stap ’n entjie.”

Marta weet sy sal na die nuutste eskapades van Arik Brechtwald moet luister. Rosie het op hom verlief geraak die dag toe hy haar uit die water gered het. Dit help niks om haar daarop te wys dat Arik die amperse verdrinking in die eerste plek veroorsaak het nie. Hy het haar uitgedaag om die Zulg oor te steek. Sy was halfpad toe sy op ’n klip gly en die water haar stroomaf oor ’n klein watervalletjie gesleur het voordat Arik haar beetgekry het. Hy het haar opgetel en na die oewer toe gedra. Sedertdien was Arik Rosie se ridder op ’n wit perd.

Die sneeu sif sag uit die wolke bokant hulle asof om die wit kombers oor Steffisburg digter te maak. Rook krul soos spookagtige vingers uit die skoorstene en verdwyn in die stil middaglug. Marta loop swaar langs die geselsende Rosie. Wit opdrifsels bedek die Alpynse graslande wat oor ’n paar maande groen sal wees met spatsels rooi, geel en blou bloeisels wat Frau Fuchs se bye sal lok en voed. Rosie vee die sneeu van ’n stomp af en gaan sit van waar hulle op Hotel Edelweiss en Steffisburg onder hulle kan afkyk. As dit oopgetrek was, sou hulle die *Schloss Thun* en die *Thunersee* soos ’n grys glasblad kon sien.

Vandag maak die lae wolke dat die son soos ’n wit, wasige bal lyk wat enige oomblik van die berge kan afbons.

Marta se asem maak stoom. Haar oë raak vol trane terwyl sy na Rosie se mymeringe oor Arik luister. Buiten haar onsekerheid oor Arik se gevoelens het haar vriendin nie ’n enkele probleem in die wêreld nie. Dalk is Pappa reg. Sy en Rosie sal vir nog ’n rukkie vriendinne wees, en dan sal hulle verskillende situasies ’n muur tussen hulle bou. Marta werk nou vir die Gilgans. Sy is nie die maatjie wat kom kuier of tee drink of sit en gesels terwyl Rosie se ma anyskoekies op ’n silwer skinkbord voorsit en warm sjokolade in porseleinkoppies skink nie. Alles gaan verander, en Marta haat die gedagte.

Noudat Pappa haar uit die skool gehaal het, sal sy niks meer buiten ’n bediende of kinderoppasster wees nie. Sy kan Mamma help klere maak, maar Mamma maak so min geld vir die hoeveelheid ure wat sy vir vroue soos Frau Keller werk wat ’n aalmoes betaal en die beste verwag. En Mamma sien nooit ’n frank van haar inkomste nie. Pappa is in beheer van die beursie en hy kla altyd oor hoe min hulle het, al het hy altyd genoeg om vir ’n bier te betaal.

Rosie sit haar arm om Marta se skouers. “Moenie so hartseer lyk nie.”

Marta staan skielik op en tree weg. “Herr Scholz sou vir my Frans geleer het. Ek kon met Latyn aangehou het. As ek net nog een taal

geken het, sou ek eendag ’n goeie werk in ’n goeie winkel in Interlaken kon kry. As my pa sy sin kry, sal ek nooit meer as ’n bediende wees nie.” Die oomblik toe die bitter woorde uit is, wil sy haar skaam. Hoe kon sy sulke goed vir Rosie sê? “Ek’s nie ondankbaar teenoor jou ouers nie. Jou ma was vandag so goed vir my … ”

“Jy is vir hulle soos ’n dogter.”

“Omdat ek vir jou soos ’n sussie is.”

“Dit gaan nie verander omdat jy nie meer in die skool is nie. Ek wens ek kon ophou. Ek sal eerder by die huis bly en my ma help as om my kop vol feite te probeer stop.”

“Ag, Rosie.” Marta druk haar gesig in haar hande. “Ek sou alles gegee het om te bly en ten minste klaar te maak met hoërskool.”

“Ek kan vir jou boeke kry.”

“Ek het nie nou tyd nie. Pappa het daarvan seker gemaak.” Marta tuur na die wolkbedekte berge wat soos tronkmure uittroon. Haar pa is van plan om haar gevange te hou. Sy is sterker en gesonder as Mamma. Sy leer vinniger as Hermann en Elise. Hermann sal universiteit toe gestuur word. Elise gaan trou. Marta gaan by die huis gehou word. Iemand moet immers die werk doen wanneer Mamma nie kan nie.

“Ek moet huis toe gaan. Ek moet Mamma gaan help.”

Terwyl hulle terugloop, neem Rosie vir Marta aan die hand. “As Hermann dit tot in die hoërskool maak, sal jou pa jou dalk toelaat om terug te kom skool toe.”

“Hermann sal weer druip. Hy het nie ’n kop vir boeke nie.” Ten minste sal Pappa nie volgende keer die skuld op haar kan pak nie.

## Chapter 2

Marta spent two years working for the Beckers, Zimmers, and Gilgans. During the winters, she worked for Frau Fuchs as well, smoking the bees into a stupor so she could rob the hives. Marta cranked the handle to spin the honey from the combs. After days and days of hard work, Frau Fuchs paid her in honey, only two small jars. When Papa saw them, he went into a rage and threw one against the wall.

At least, Mama and Elise appreciated the fresh breakfast loaves Marta brought home from the bakery, and sometimes she brought cookies. At Christmas, the Beckers gave her *Marzipan* and *Schokoladenkuchen*. Dr. Zimmer came to see Mama every few weeks, although Papa preferred francs in his pocket to the poultices and elixirs the doctor gave Mama. All through spring and summer, Frau Zimmer paid in fresh vegetables and flowers from her garden. Mama didn't have to purchase anything from the market.

Only the Gilgans paid in francs, but Marta never saw any of them.

"Herr Gilgan says you're smart enough to run your own hotel someday." Papa gave a derisive laugh as he dipped bread into hot cheese. "Since you're so smart, you can make sure Hermann passes the examinations next time."

"And how can I do that, Papa?" Marta bristled. "Hermann has to want to learn."

His face flushed in anger. "Listen to her, Hermann. She thinks you're stupid. She thinks you can't learn. She still thinks she's better than you."

"I never said I was better!" Marta shoved her chair back. "I was just more interested!"

Papa stood and loomed over her. "Make Hermann interested and maybe I'll send you to school. If he fails again, you'll answer to me!" He leaned across the table and shoved her back into her chair. "Do you understand me?"

Angry tears filled her eyes. "I understand you, Papa." She understood him all too well.

He grabbed his coat and went out the door. Elise didn't raise her head, and Mama didn't ask where he was going.

"I'm sorry, Marta." Hermann spoke glumly from across the table.

* * *

Marta worked with Hermann every evening to no avail. “It’s all so boring!” Hermann groaned. “And it’s nice outside.”

Marta slapped him across the back of his head. “That’s nothing to what I’ll get if you don’t concentrate.”

He pushed his chair back. “As soon as I’m old enough, I’m quitting and going into the Army.”

She went to Mama. “Please speak to him, Mama. He won’t listen to me.” Maybe if Mama pleaded with Hermann, he might try harder. “What hope have I of going back to school when that dolt refuses to use the brain God gave him?”

Dr. Zimmer’s poultices and elixirs had done little to help Mama’s cough. She looked drawn and pale; her clothes hung loosely on her thin frame. The bones of her wrists looked as fragile as birds’ wings.

“There’s not a thing I can do, Marta. You can’t change a dog into a cat.”

Marta flung herself into a chair and put her head in her hands. “Because he’s hopeless, I have no hope.”

Mama left her needle tucked into an embroidery stitch as she reached over to cover Marta’s hand. “You’re learning new things every day, from the Beckers and Gilgans. You must wait and see what God will do.”

Sighing, Marta threaded a needle to help Mama. “Every franc I earn will be used to pay Hermann’s school expenses. And he doesn’t care, Mama. Not a bit.” Her voice broke. “It’s not fair!”

“God has plans for you, too, Marta.”

“It’s Papa who makes the plans.” She stabbed her needle into the wool.

“God says to trust and obey.”

“So I must submit to one who despises me and crushes every hope I have?”

“God does not despise you.”

“I meant Papa.”

Mama didn’t disagree. Marta stopped and watched her mother’s slender fingers dip the needle in and out of the black wool. A delicate white edelweiss began to take form. Tying off and snipping the white thread, Mama took up another with yellow and made tiny French knots at the center of the flower. When she finished, she smiled at Marta. “You can find pleasure in work well done.”

Marta’s chest squeezed tight with pain. “I’m not like you, Mama.

You see the world through different eyes." Mama found blessings everywhere because she searched diligently for them. How often had Marta seen Mama leaning against the work counter in the kitchen, bent with exhaustion, sweat pouring from her brow as she watched the mountain finches flitting from branch to branch in the linden tree outside the window? A soft word from Papa would bring a tender smile. Despite his cruelty, his selfishness, Mama found something to love in him. Sometimes Marta would see a look of pity come into her mother's face when she looked at Papa.

"Do you know what you want?"

"To make something of my life. To be more than someone's servant." Her eyes grew hot and grainy. "I knew it was too much to dream of going to the university, Mama, but I would've liked to finish high school."

"What about now?"

"Now? I'd like to learn French. I'd like to learn English and Italian, too." She stabbed her needle through the black wool. "Anyone who can speak multiple languages can find a good job." She pulled the thread through too quickly and it tangled. "But I'll never have the—"

"Stop, Marta." Mama reached over and touched her gently. "You're making it worse."

Turning the black wool over, Marta plucked at the loops, loosening them.

"If the opportunity arose for you to learn more . . . ?" Mama looked at her in question.

"I'd find a good job and save money until I had enough to buy a chalet."

"You want a place like *Hotel Edelweiss*, don't you?" Mama began on another flower.

"I'll never dream of having anything as grand as that. I'd be happy with a boardinghouse." She gave a bleak laugh. "I'd be happy to work in a nice shop in Interlaken selling *Dirndln* to tourists!" She yanked the thread through. "But that's not likely, is it? What's the use of dreaming?" She thrust the wool aside and rose. If she sat another minute, she'd suffocate.

"Perhaps God put the dream in your head."

"Why?"

"To teach you patience."

"Oh, Mama . . ." Marta groaned. "Don't I show patience teaching that mulish brother of mine? Haven't I shown patience hoping Papa

might change his mind and let me go back to school? It's been two years, Mama! I've done everything he's told me to do. I'm fourteen! Rosie doesn't ask me to help her anymore. I grow more stupid every year! What good is patience when nothing will ever change?"

"Nonsense. Come and sit, *Bärchen*." Mama put her work aside and took Marta's hands firmly. "Look at what you've gained through the Beckers, Frau Fuchs and Frau Zimmer, and the Gilgans. You've learned to bake, tend bees and children, and you've seen what it takes to run a fine hotel. Doesn't that show you God is preparing you—?"

Her hands tightened when Marta opened her mouth to protest.

"Hush, Marta, and listen to me. Listen carefully. It doesn't matter what your father plans, nor what his motives might be. God will prevail. God will use everything to His good purpose if you love and trust Him."

Marta went cold. She saw something in her mother's expression that warned her. "Papa's made plans for me, hasn't he? What plans, Mama?"

Mama's blue eyes grew moist. "You must search out the usefulness in every situation."

Marta snatched her hands from Mama's. "Tell me, Mama."

"I can't. It's for your father to explain." She took up her sewing and said nothing more.

Papa laid out his plans for Marta the next morning. "You will be pleased to know I'm sending you to school. I would've sent you sooner, but *Haushaltungsschule Bern* only takes girls fourteen and older. Count and Countess Saintonge are the instructors. Royalty! You should be happy! I've been assured that any girl who graduates from their housekeeping school will have no difficulty in finding a good position. You'll be in Bern six months. You can pay me back when you come home and find a position."

"Pay you back?"

His eyes cooled. "The tuition cost me 120 francs and another 30 francs for books. You should be pleased. You wanted to go to school." His voice hardened. "You're going!"

"This isn't the kind of school I had in mind, Papa." As well he knew!

"You're so smart; let's see you make the most of the opportunity I'm giving you. This is my thanks for Hermann passing his examinations. Who knows? If you do well enough in Bern, you might end up working at *Schloss Thun*!" The idea seemed to please him.

"That would be something to boast about! You leave in three days."

"But what about the Beckers, Papa? and the Zimmers and Gilgans?"

"I told them yesterday I was sending you to school. They said to wish you well."

*School!* Marta fumed. Training to be a better servant was more like it.

Mama sat silent at the end of the table, hands in her lap. Angry, Marta looked at her. How could Mama look so serene? She remembered Mama's plea. *"Search out the usefulness . . . Count your blessings. . . ."*

She would be away from home for the first time. She would live in Bern. She wouldn't have to look at Papa or listen to his constant complaints.

"Thank you, Papa. I look forward to it."

Elise gave a soft cry and fled the table.

"What's wrong with that girl now?" Papa muttered.

"Marta's leaving home, Johann."

"She's coming back!" He waved his hand in exasperation. "It's not as though she's leaving for good. She'll only be gone six months and then she'll be home forever."

The hair on the back of Marta's neck rose. *Forever.*

As soon as Papa left the table, Mama asked Marta to find Elise. "She'll probably be down by the creek. You know how she loves to listen to the water."

Marta found her where the creek ran into the Zulg. She sat down beside her. "I have to go sometime, Elise."

Elise clasped her knees against her chest and stared at the shimmering ripples below. "But Bern is so far away." Her blue eyes filled with tears. "Do you want to go?"

"I'd rather be going to the university, but housekeeping school will have to do."

"What will I do without you?" Tears slipped down Elise's pale cheeks.

"What you always do." Marta wiped the tears away. "Help Mama."

"But I'll be alone in our room at night. You know I'm afraid of the dark."

"Let the cat sleep with you."

Elise started to cry. "Why can't things stay as they are? Why can't

Papa let you stay here?"

"Things can't stay the same." She pushed a blonde curl behind Elise's ear. "Someday, you'll marry, Elise. You'll have a husband who loves you. You'll have a home of your own. You'll have children." She gave Elise a rueful smile. "When you go, Elise, where will I be?" Papa said no man would ever want such a plain, ill-tempered girl.

Elise blinked, like a child waking to a bad dream. "I thought you'd always be here."

In Steffisburg, in Papa's tailor shop, under Papa's thumb, doing Papa's will. "That's what Papa thinks. Is that what you wish for me, Elise?"

"Aren't you afraid to leave?" Tears slipped down her white cheeks. "I want to stay home with Mama."

"You're not going anywhere, Elise." Marta lay back in the spring grass and flung an arm over her head. "And I'm only going to be away six months."

Elise lay back and rested her head against Marta's shoulder. "I wish you could stay here and not go at all."

Marta put her arm around her sister and stared up at the darkening sky. "Every time you think of me, Elise, pray. Pray I learn something useful. Pray I learn more in Bern than how to be someone's maid."

* * *

Marta went by to thank the Beckers and Zimmers and to say good-bye. And she went to the Gilgans' the day before she left. Frau Gilgan served tea and cookies. Herr Gilgan gave her twenty francs. "This is for you, Marta." He closed her fingers around it. Marta couldn't speak past the lump in her throat.

Frau Gilgan suggested Marta and Rosie go for a nice walk up to the meadow. Rosie took her hand. "Mama doesn't think you'll come back. She thinks you'll find a job in Bern and stay there, that I'll have to wait until our family goes up there before I see you again." The Gilgans went up every few months to buy things for the hotel. Sometimes Rosie and her sisters came back with ready-made dresses from one of the shops along the *Marktgasse*.

When they sat on their favorite fallen log, Rosie lifted her white apron and dug into the deep pocket of her skirt. "I have something for you."

"A book!" Marta took it with pleasure. Finding no title on the spine, she opened it. "Blank pages."

“So you can write all your adventures.” Rosie grinned. “I expect you to let me read it when I see you. I want to know about all the handsome city boys you meet, the places you see, all the wonderful things you’re going to do.”

Blinking back tears, Marta ran her hand over the fine leather. “I’ve never had anything so fine.”

“I wish I were going with you. There’s so much to see and do. What fun we’d have! When you’ve finished school, you’ll be hired by a handsome aristocrat who’ll fall in love with you, and—”

“Don’t be silly. No one will ever want to marry me.”

Rosie took Marta’s hand and wove their fingers tightly together. “You may not be as beautiful as Elise, but you have fine qualities. Everyone thinks so. My mother and father think you could do anything you set your mind to.”

“Did you tell them about my dream?” Marta pulled her hand away.

“In a weak moment, and go ahead and scowl at me, but I’m not sorry I did. Why do you think Mama told you so much about what it takes to run a hotel?”

As they walked down the hill toward Steffisburg, Rosie took Marta’s hand again. “Promise you’ll write and tell me everything.”

Marta wove her fingers with Rosie’s. “Only if you promise to write back and not fill every line with dribble about Arik Brechtwald.”

They both laughed.

## Hoofstuk 2

Marta werk twee jaar lank vir die Beckers, Zimmers en Gilgans. Gedurende die winters werk sy ook vir Frau Fuchs. Dié verwag van haar om die bye uit te rook sodat sy die heuning uit die korwe kan haal. Marta draai die slinger om die heuning uit die heuningkoeke te tap. Ná dae en dae se harde werk betaal Frau Fuchs haar in heuning, net twee klein flessies. Toe Pappa dit sien, ontplof hy en gooi een van die flessies teen die muur.

Ten minste waardeer Mamma en Elise die vars brode wat Marta van die bakkery af bring, en soms bring sy koekies. Vir Kersfees gee die Beckers vir haar marsepein en sjokolade *Torten*. Dokter Zimmer kom besoek Mamma elke paar weke, al verkies Pappa franke in sy sak bo die pappe en eliksers wat die dokter vir Mamma gee. Die hele lente en somer betaal Frau Zimmer in vars groente en blomme uit haar tuin. Mamma hoef niks by die mark te gaan koop nie.

Dis net die Gilgans wat in geld betaal, maar Marta sien nooit ’n frank daarvan nie.

“Herr Gilgan sê jy is slim genoeg om eendag jou eie hotel te hê.” Pappa lag spottend en doop ’n stuk brood in warm kaas. “Dan kan jy seker maak dat Hermann volgende keer sy eksamen deurkom.”

“En hoe moet ek dit doen, Pappa?” vererg Marta haar. “Hermann moet leer.”

Haar pa gluur na haar. “Luister na haar, Hermann. Sy dink jy is dom. Sy dink jy kan nie leer nie. Sy dink nog steeds sy is beter as jy.”

“Ek het nooit gesê ek is beter nie!” Marta skuif haar stoel terug. “Ek het maar net gewonder.”

Pappa staan op en troon bo-oor haar. “Kry Hermann sover om te leer, dan stuur ek jou dalk terug skool toe. As hy weer druip, kry jy met my te doen!” Hy leun oor die tafel en pluk haar terug op haar stoel. “Verstaan jy my?”

Woedende trane brand in haar oë. “Ek verstaan, Pappa.” Sy verstaan maar net te goed.

Hy gryp sy jas en gaan by die deur uit. Elise kyk nie op nie en

Mamma vra nie waarheen hy gaan nie.

"Ek's jammer, Marta," kom dit bedruk van Hermann oorkant haar.

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Marta sit elke aand tevergeefs saam met Hermann en werk. "Dis so vervelig!" kreun Hermann. "En dis so lekker buite."

Marta klap hom teen sy agterkop. "Dis niks teen wat ek gaan kry as jy nie konsentreer nie."

Hy stoot sy stoel terug. "Sodra ek oud genoeg is, gaan ek skool los en weermag toe gaan."

Sy gaan na Mamma toe. "Praat asseblief met hom, Mamma. Hy wil nie na my luister nie." As Mamma mooi praat, sal Hermann dalk harder probeer. "Watter kans het ek om terug te gaan skool toe as die stommerik weier om die brein te gebruik wat hy by die Here gekry het?"

Dokter Zimmer se pappe en wondermiddels doen nie veel om Mamma se hoesery te verlig nie. Sy lyk afgerem en bleek, haar klere hang sakkerig aan haar maer lyf en haar broos gewrigte is knakdun.

"Daar is niks wat ek kan doen nie, Marta. 'n Mens kan nie 'n hond in 'n kat verander nie."

Marta val op 'n stoel neer en druk haar gesig in haar hande. "As Hermann nie so hopeloos was nie, was daar dalk nog hoop vir my."

Mamma los haar naald in die materiaal en plaas haar hand op Marta s'n. "Jy leer elke dag nuwe dinge by die Beckers en Gilgans. Ons moet wag om te sien wat die Here gaan doen."

Marta sug terwyl sy 'n garing deur 'n naald se oog steek om Mamma te help. "Elke frank wat ek verdien, sal gebruik word om Hermann se skoolgeld te betaal. En hy voel nie 'n veer nie, Mamma. Nie 'n snars nie." Haar stem breek. "Dis nie regverdig nie!"

"Die Here het vir jou ook 'n plan, Marta."

"Dis Pappa wat die planne maak." Sy steek haar naald in die wol.

"Die Here sê ons moet vertrou en gehoorsaam wees."

"Dus moet ek my aan iemand onderwerp wat my verag en al my drome vertrap?"

"Die Here verag jou nie."

"Ek het van Pappa gepraat."

Mamma stry nie met haar nie. Marta hou op werk en kyk hoe die naald in haar ma se skraal vingers in die swart wol verdwyn en

verskyn. ’n Delikate wit edelweiss is besig om vorm aan te neem. Nadat Mamma die wit garing geknoop en afgeknip het, kies sy ’n gele en maak klein Franse stekies in die middel van die blom. Toe sy klaar is, glimlag sy vir Marta. “Daar is ook geluk in ’n stuk werk wat goed gedoen is.”

Die seer swel in Marta se bors. “Ek is nie soos Mamma nie. Mamma kyk met ander oë na die wêreld.” Mamma sien die mooi in alles omdat sy doelgerig daarna soek. Marta het Mamma al dikwels, krom van uitputting en haar voorkop blink van die sweet, teen die werkbank in die kombuis sien leun, haar blik op die lewerike wat tussen die takke van die lindeboom voor die venster rondfladder. ’n Sagte woord van Pappa sal ’n teer glimlag aan haar mond laat trek. Ondanks sy wreedheid, ondanks sy selfsug, kry Mamma iets in hom om lief te hê. Soms sien Marta ’n jammerte op haar ma se gesig wanneer sy na Pappa kyk.

“Weet jy wat jy wil hê?”

“Om iets van my lewe te maak. Om meer as iemand se bediende te wees.” Haar oë brand. “Ek weet dit was te veel gevra om universiteit toe te gaan, Mamma, maar ek wil so graag klaarmaak met skool.”

“Wat van nou?”

“Nou? Ek sal graag wil leer Frans praat. Én Engels én Italiaans.” Sy steek haar naald wrewelrig deur die swart wol. “Enigiemand wat ’n paar tale kan praat, kan ’n goeie werk kry.” Sy trek die gare te vinnig deur en dit koek. “Maar ek sal nooit die – ”

“Hou op, Marta.” Mamma raak sag aan haar arm. “Jy maak dit erger.”

Marta draai die swart wol om en begin die lussies lostrek.

“As jy die geleentheid het om verder te leer?” Mamma kyk vraend na haar.

“Ek sou ’n goeie werk kry en geld spaar totdat ek genoeg het om ’n plekkie te koop.”

“Jy sal graag ’n plek soos Hotel Edelweiss wil hê, nè?” Mamma begin met ’n ander blom.

“Ek sal nooit droom om so ’n groot plek te hê nie. Ek sal met ’n losieshuis tevrede wees.” Sy lag flou. “Ek sal tevrede wees om in ’n oulike winkel in Interlaken te werk en *Dirndls* aan toeriste te verkoop!” Sy pluk die gare deur die wolmateriaal. “Maar dit sal nie sommer gebeur nie. Wat help dit om te droom?” Sy plak die wol neer en staan op. As sy nog langer bly sit, gaan sy stik.

“Dalk het die Here die droom vir jou gegee.”

“Hoekom?”

“Om jou geduld te leer.”

“Ag, Mamma ... ” kreun Marta. “Is ek nie geduldig genoeg met hierdie stommerik van ’n broer nie? Was ek nie geduldig genoeg in die hoop dat Pappa sou besluit om my weer skool toe te stuur nie? Dit is nou al twee jaar, Mamma! Ek doen alles wat hy vir my sê om te doen. Ek’s 14! Rosie vra my nie meer om haar te help nie. Ek word elke jaar net dommer! Wat help geduld as niks ooit gaan verander nie!”

“Nonsens. Kom sit, *Bärchen*.” Mamma sit haar werk neer en neem Marta se hande ferm in hare. “Kyk na wat jy alles deur die Beckers, Frau Fuchs en Frau Zimmer en die Gilgans geleer het. Jy het geleer om te bak, bye en kinders te versorg en jy weet wat dit behels om ’n hotel te bestuur. Is dit nie ’n teken dat God besig is om jou voor te berei nie?”

Haar hande verstyf toe Marta haar mond oopmaak om te protesteer.

“Wag nou eers, Marta, en luister na my. Luister mooi. Dit maak nie saak wat jou pa beplan of wat sy motiewe is nie. God se wil sal geskied. God sal alles ten goede laat meewerk as jy Hom liefhet en vertrou.”

Marta word koud. Sy sien iets in haar ma se oë wat haar waarsku. “Pappa het planne vir my gemaak, nè? Watse planne, Mamma?”

Mamma se blou oë word blink. “’n Mens moet die positiewe in elke situasie soek.”

Marta ruk haar hande uit Mamma s’n. “Sê vir my, Mamma.”

“Ek kan nie. Jou pa sal verduidelik.” Sy hervat haar naaldwerk en praat nie verder nie.

Die volgende oggend vertel Pappa vir Marta wat sy plan is. “Jy sal bly wees om te hoor dat ek jou skool toe stuur. Ek sou jou vroeër gestuur het, maar die *Haushaltungsschule Bern* neem net meisies van 14 en ouer. Graaf en gravin Saintonge bied die klasse aan. Hulle is adellikes! Jy behoort dankbaar te wees! Hulle het my daarvan verseker dat enige meisie wat daar klaarmaak, sonder moeite ’n goeie pos kry. Jy sal vir ses maande in Bern wees. Jy kan my terugbetaal wanneer jy huis toe kom en werk kry.”

“Terugbetaal?”

Sy oë verkil. “Die klasse gaan my 120 frank kos en dan moet ek nog 30 frank vir die boeke betaal. Jy behoort dankbaar te wees. Jy wou mos skool toe gaan.” Hy praat hard. “Jy sal gaan!”

“Dis nie die skool wat ek in gedagte gehad het nie, Pappa.” Asof hy dit nie geweet het nie!

“Jy’s so slim, kom ons kyk of jy die beste van die geleentheid maak wat ek jou gee. Dit is om dankie te sê dat Hermann sy eksamen deurgekom het. Wie weet? As jy goed genoeg doen in Bern, werk jy dalk nog eendag in *Schloss Thun*!” Hy lyk heel tevrede met homself. “Dit sal nogal nie te versmaai wees nie! Jy vertrek oor drie dae.”

“Maar wat van die Beckers, Pappa? En die Zimmers en Gilgans?”

“Ek het gister vir hulle gesê ek gaan jou skool toe stuur. Hulle het hulle beste wense gestuur.”

*Skool!* Marta kook. Dit voel meer na opleiding om ’n beter bediende te wees.

Mamma sit doodstil aan die onderpunt van die tafel, haar hande op haar skoot. Marta kyk kwaad na haar. Hoe kan Mamma so kalm lyk? Sy onthou Mamma se pleidooi. “*Soek die positiewe … Tel jou seëninge …*”

Sy gaan vir die eerste keer uit die huis wees. Sy gaan in Bern bly. Sy sal nie in Pappa hoef vas te kyk of na sy knaende klagtes hoef te luister nie.

“Dankie, Pappa. Ek sien uit daarna.”

Elise gee ’n sagte kreet en vlug uit die vertrek.

“Wat is dit nou met die kind?” mompel Pappa.

“Marta gaan weg, Johann.”

“En sy kom weer terug!” Hy maak ’n ergerlike gebaar. “Dis nie asof sy vir altyd weggaan nie. Sy gaan net vir ses maande weg en dan gaan sy vir altyd huis toe kom.”

Marta voel haar nekhare rys. *Vir altyd.*

Die oomblik toe Pappa uit is, vra Mamma vir Marta om Elise te gaan soek. “Sy is tien teen een onder by die stroom. Jy weet hoe sy dit geniet om na die water te luister.”

Marta kry haar waar die stroompie by die Zulg aansluit. Sy gaan sit langs haar. “Ek sal die een of ander tyd moet weggaan, Elise.”

Elise sit met haar knieë teen haar bors opgetrek en staar na die glinsterende kabbeling onder haar. “Maar Bern is so ver.” Haar blou oë swem in die trane. “Wil jy gaan?”

“Ek sal eerder universiteit toe wou gaan, maar dit is seker maar goed genoeg om na die huishoudkundeskool toe te gaan.”

“Wat gaan ek sonder jou doen?” Die trane loop oor Elise se bleek wange.

“Wat jy altyd doen.” Marta vee haar trane af. “Vir Mamma help.”

“Maar ek gaan alleen in ons kamer slaap. Jy weet ek’s bang vir die donker.”

“Die kat kan mos by jou slaap.”

Elise begin huil. “Hoekom kan dinge nie net bly soos dit is nie? Hoekom kan Pappa jou nie hier laat bly nie?”

“Dinge kan nie dieselfde bly nie.” Sy vee ’n blonde krul agter Elise se oor in. “Eendag gaan jy trou, Elise. Jy gaan ’n man hê wat lief is vir jou. Jy gaan jou eie huis hê. Jy gaan kinders hê.” Sy glimlag meewarig. “En waar gaan ek wees as jy weggaan, Elise?” Pappa sê niemand sal met so ’n vaal, humeurige meisie wil trou nie.

Elise knipper haar oë, soos ’n kind wat uit ’n nagmerrie wakker word. “Ek het gedink jy gaan altyd hier wees.”

In Steffisburg, in Pappa se snyerswinkel, onder Pappa se duim waar sy alles moet doen wat hy sê. “Dis wat Pappa dink. Is dit wat jy vir my wil hê, Elise?”

“Is jy nie bang om weg te gaan nie?” Haar trane kom opnuut. “Ek wil by die huis by Mamma bly.”

“Jy gaan nêrens heen nie, Elise.” Marta lê agteroor in die lentegras en laat val haar arm oor haar kop. “En ek gaan net vir ses maande weg wees.”

Elise sak agteroor en lê met haar kop teen Marta se skouer. “Ek wens jy kon net hier bly en glad nie weggaan nie.”

Marta sit haar arm om haar sussie en kyk op na waar dit besig is om donker te word. “Elke keer wanneer jy aan my dink, Elise, bid. Bid dat ek iets nuttigs leer. Bid dat ek in Bern meer leer as om iemand se bediende te wees.”

* * *

Marta gaan na die Beckers en Zimmers toe om te gaan dankie sê en te groet. Die dag voor haar vertrek gaan sy na die Gilgans toe. Frau Gilgan bedien tee en koekies. Herr Gilgan gee vir haar 20 frank. “Dit is vir jou, Marta.” Hy vou haar vingers bo-oor die geld. Marta kan niks verby die knop in haar keel sê nie.

Frau Gilgan stel voor dat Marta en Rosie ’n entjie gaan stap. Rosie neem haar hand. “Mamma dink nie jy gaan terugkom nie. Sy dink jy gaan ’n werk in Bern kry en daar bly, dat ek sal moet wag totdat ons gesin soontoe gaan voordat ek jou weer sal sien.” Die Gilgans gaan elke paar maande soontoe om voorraad vir die hotel te gaan koop. Soms kom Rosie en haar susters terug met klaargemaakte rokke uit een van die winkels in die *Marktgasse*.

Toe hulle op hulle gunsteling stomp gaan sit, lig Rosie haar wit voorskoot op en grawe diep in haar roksak. “Ek het iets vir jou.”

“’n Boek!” Marta neem dit met genoeë. Daar staan niks voorop nie en sy maak dit oop. “Die bladsye is leeg.”

“Sodat jy al jou avonture kan neerskryf.” Rosie lag vrolik. “En jy gaan my dit laat lees wanneer ek jou sien. Ek wil alles weet van die oulike jong manne wat jy in die stad ontmoet, die plekke wat jy sien, al die wonderlike dinge wat jy gaan doen.”

Marta knip haar oë teen die trane en streel oor die sagte leer. “Ek het nog nooit iets so moois gehad nie.”

“Ek wens ek kon saam met jou gaan. Daar is soveel om te sien en te doen. Ons sou soveel pret gehad het! Wanneer jy klaar is met skool gaan jy deur ’n aantreklike aristokraat aangestel word wat op jou gaan verlief raak, en – ”

“Moenie laf wees nie. Niemand sal ooit met my wil trou nie.”

Rosie neem Marta se hand en vleg haar vingers styf deur hare. “Jy is dalk nie so beeldskoon soos Elise nie, maar jy het baie goeie eienskappe. Almal dink so. My ma en pa dink jy sal enigiets kan doen waarop jy besluit.”

“Het jy hulle van my droom vertel?” Marta trek haar hand weg.

“In ’n swak oomblik, en jy kan maar vir my kwaad wees, maar ek is nie jammer ek het nie. Hoekom dink jy het Mamma so baie met jou gepraat oor hoe om ’n hotel te bestuur?”

Terwyl hulle die afdraande na Steffisburg loop, neem Rosie weer Marta se hand. “Belowe my jy sal skryf en my van alles vertel.”

Marta vleg haar vingers deur Rosie s’n. “Net solank jy belowe om terug te skryf en sal probeer om nie bladsye vol oor Arik Brechtwald te krabbel nie.”

Hulle albei lag.

## Chapter 3

Mama awakened her before dawn the next morning. Papa gave Marta just enough money to buy a one-way train ticket to Bern. “I’ll send you enough to get you home when you graduate.” He handed her the letter of acceptance, proof of tuition payment, and a map of Bern with the address of the housekeeping school. “You better start now. The train leaves Thun in two hours.”

“I thought you might go with me.”

“Why? You can make it on your own.” He went into the shop to start work early.

“Don’t look so worried.”

“I’ve never been on a train, Mama.”

Mama gave her a teasing smile. “It goes faster than a coach.” Mama hugged her tightly and handed over the knapsack she had packed with a spare skirt, two shirtwaists, undergarments, a hairbrush, and toiletries.

Marta tried not to show how nervous she felt going off on her own. She was thankful Elise hadn’t awakened, for if her sister had started crying, Marta would have given in to tears, too. She kissed Mama’s cool cheek and thanked her. “Good-bye, Papa!” she called out.

“You’d better hurry!” he shouted back.

Mama went out the door with her. She took a small purse from her pocket and gave it to Marta. “A few francs for paper, envelopes, and postage stamps.” She cupped Marta’s face and kissed her twice, then whispered in her ear. “And buy yourself a cup of chocolate. Then find the Samson Fountain. It was my favorite.” She kept an arm around Marta and walked with her a little ways. “When you get up each morning, you will know I’m praying for you. And every evening when you go to bed, I’ll be praying then, too.” If God listened to anyone in the family, surely He listened to Mama, who loved Him so much. “In whatever you do, Marta, do it as unto the Lord.”

“I will, Mama.”

Mama let her go. When Marta looked back, she saw tears in her mother’s eyes. She looked so frail. “Don’t forget us.”

“Never.” Marta wanted to run back and hold on to her.

“Go on now.” Mama waved.

Afraid she might lose her courage, Marta turned away quickly and started off down the street at a brisk walk.

The farther she went, the more her excitement grew. She ran part

of the way and arrived at the train station just as the ticket office opened. Her heart leaped when the train arrived. She watched to see what other passengers did, then handed her ticket to the conductor before climbing aboard. She made her way down the narrow aisle, passing a man in a ready-made business suit shuffling through papers from his case. Another sat two rows behind him, reading a book. A woman told her three children to stop fussing at one another.

Marta took a seat near the back. She put her knapsack between her feet and looked out the window. She jumped in fright when the train jolted. She caught hold of the seat in front of her and hung on, fighting down panic. How fast would this train move? Would it jump the tracks? Could she reach the door and get off before the train left the station? The thought of what Papa would say and do if she showed up at the front door stopped her. She looked at the other passengers and saw that no one else seemed alarmed at the jolting and creaking, or the loud whistle. She leaned back and watched Thun pass by outside her window.

As the train picked up speed, her heart did, too. Every minute took her farther away from Mama and Rosie and Elise. When tears came, silent and hot, she wiped them away.

The Aare River ran alongside the train tracks. She watched out the window as she rode through hills dotted with plump, broad-boxed farmhouses topped with roofs curving almost to the ground. The train stopped at every town, and she leaned this way and that to see as much of the squares and markets as she could. She saw old covered bridges not yet replaced with stone. Every village had a clock tower, even if it didn’t have a train station.

The wheels clickity-clicked as the train sped toward Bern. When the outskirts of the city came into view, Marta picked up her knapsack and held it on her lap. She could see great stone buildings and a bridge across the green Aare as it curved around the old city. Houses stood in rows above the river on the other side. She looked at her map and out the window again, not sure which direction she would have to go to find the Saintonges’ housekeeping school. She would have to ask directions.

When the train stopped inside the station, Marta followed the others down the steps. She felt as though she had stepped into one of Frau Fuchs’s beehives with its constant, churning movement of bodies and the hum of voices. Conductors called out train numbers. Steam hissed. Someone bumped into her and excused himself quickly,

hurrying on to catch his train. She spotted a tall man in black uniform and red cap and headed toward him. When she showed her map, he pointed out the route she would have to take and told her how much time it would take to ride the short distance. “You can take the tram.”

Marta decided to walk. She wanted to see some of the city, and who knew how many days would pass before she had free time to do whatever she pleased. Was the school in session on Saturday? She didn’t know. Knapsack over her shoulder, she hurried from the station and strolled along a cobblestone street, looking up at the high stone buildings with flags flying. She paused to watch the tower clock’s animated figures strike the hour. She passed by plazas and wandered in the crisscross of arcades lined with cafés, jewelers, clothiers, pastry shops, and shops with window displays of chocolate.

As the sun dipped, Marta hurried toward the bridge across the River Aare. She climbed the hill and found the street name on the letterhead. By the time she found the right address, she felt tired but exhilarated. No sign told her she’d come to the right place, and the house in front of her looked like a grand mansion rather than a school.

A woman in black dress, white apron, and cap answered the door.

Marta gave an awkward curtsy. “I’m Marta Schneider from Steffisburg.” She held out her documents.

“Never curtsy to the staff,” the woman said as she took the papers, glanced at them, and beckoned her in. “Welcome to the *Haushaltungsschule Bern*.”

She closed the door behind Marta. “I’m Frau Yoder. You’re the last to arrive, Fräulein Schneider. You look tired. You didn’t walk, did you?”

“From the train station.” Marta gaped at the grand staircase and the walls with portraits in gilded frames, the finely woven rugs, the porcelain figurines. This was a housekeeping school?

“Most people ride back up.”

“I wanted to see some of the city.” Marta stared up at the ceiling painted with angels. “I wasn’t sure when I would have a free day to see the sights.”

“You’ll have Sundays to yourself. Come. I’ll give you an orientation tour. The downstairs holds the parlor, living room, the count’s offices, and the countess’s conservatory. The kitchen is on the other side, next to the dining room. The second floor has a ballroom and several large bedrooms. The third floor has most of the guest

rooms. You and the other girls will be in the fourth-floor dormitory. The classroom is there also."

Frau Yoder walked head high, hands clasped in front of her. She extended her hand as she identified each room and allowed Marta a few seconds to glance around at the rich interiors. "The countess receives guests in this parlor. She had the walls repainted royal yellow after visiting the *Schloss Schönbrunn* in Vienna last year." She lifted a hand before clasping both in front of her again. "That's the countess's portrait over the fireplace. She's lovely, isn't she?"

A young woman with dark eyes and long, flowing black hair over bare shoulders seemed to stare down at her. The countess wore a necklace of diamonds and emeralds around her slender throat, and her dress looked like something from a history book Marta had read. "She looks like Marie Antoinette."

"Let's hope she doesn't end up the same way."

It seemed a surprising thing to say, and especially with such a dry tone. Frau Yoder moved on. Marta followed, growing more curious. "Do the count and countess conduct the classes?"

"They will speak with you on occasion, but I do the teaching."

"Saintonge. Are they French?"

"It's not polite to ask, Fräulein."

Marta blushed. "Oh." *And why not?* she wanted to say, but Frau Yoder moved on down a hall. Marta felt like a duckling racing after its waddling mother. "How many other students are in attendance, Frau Yoder?"

"Seven."

"Only seven?"

Frau Yoder paused and turned. She looked down her nose at Marta. "Only the most promising are accepted." She looked Marta over. "Your coat is custom-made, is it not?"

She had made it herself, but didn't feel inclined to tell the woman. "My mother is a dressmaker and my father is a tailor."

Frau Yoder leaned closer and looked at the embroidery. "Beautiful work." She smiled at Marta. "I'm surprised your parents sent you here. Come along." Frau Yoder turned away again. "I want to show you the rest of the house. If you're hungry, there is cabbage soup and bread in the kitchen. The count and countess are out for the evening. You'll meet them tomorrow morning at ten in the upstairs classroom. However, I expect you there by eight for instructions."

Marta's curiosity grew even more with her first sight of Countess

Saintonge standing in the bare-floor hallway outside the classroom door. She was very young to be a headmistress of anything, and she wore less-than-modest clothing. Her brows slanted over a pair of sly, dark eyes. She opened her mouth in a silent laugh, showing small, straight white teeth. She whispered something behind her hand and a man appeared. He had gray hair, pale eyes, and a thin, angular face. He looked old enough to be the lady's father! When he leaned close, Marta thought he meant to kiss Countess Saintonge right there in the hallway. He said something in a low voice and disappeared. The countess looked annoyed, but lifting her head, she entered the room with an air of hauteur. "Good morning, students."

Everyone shot to their feet and curtsied as they had been instructed to do.

"Countess." Frau Yoder gave a graceful curtsy. Each girl curtsied again as her name was mentioned.

The countess clasped her hands delicately at her waist and began to talk about the fine reputation of the *Haushaltungsschule Bern* and the glowing reports she and the count had received from satisfied employers. "We select only the best." Marta wondered at that, having spent the night with the others, most of whom had less schooling than she. *We are the best?*

"Those who make it through the first three months will be fitted for one of our uniforms." When the countess raised one hand, Frau Yoder made a slow turn, showing off the ankle-length black wool skirt, white high-collared shirtwaist with long sleeves and cuffs, full-length white apron with *HB* embroidered on the right pocket, and white lace-trimmed cap. "Only those who graduate receive the honor of wearing our uniform."

As the countess went on talking, Marta studied the translucent linen day dress with its tiny pin tucks, lace insertions, white embroidered flowers and leaves, and swirls of *passementerie*. She knew the hours and cost to make such a dress.

"Fräulein Schneider, stand."

Marta rose, wondering why the countess had singled her out from among the others.

"I expect you to pay attention when I speak."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, *Countess*. And you will curtsy when you rise next time, and curtsy again before speaking."

Marta felt a rush of heat flood her cheeks. One hundred and fifty

francs to learn how to be treated like a slave! One hundred and fifty francs Papa would expect to be repaid whether she completed the course or not. Clenching her teeth, Marta curtsied. “Yes, Countess.” She curtsied again.

Countess Saintonge’s dark eyes surveyed her coolly. “Did you hear anything I said, or must I repeat it all?”

Marta dipped again. “Yes, Countess. I heard.” She began to tell her word for word until the countess lifted one of those delicate hands to stop the flow. The countess gave a slight nod for her to sit. Marta remained standing. The countess inclined her head lower this time. Marta stared back at her. The countess’s cheeks flushed pink. “Why are you still standing, Fräulein Schneider?”

Marta dipped more slowly this time and a few inches lower. “I awaited your command, Countess Saintonge.” She heard the nervous shifting of bodies around her. With another curtsy, Marta took her seat.

When class ended, Countess Saintonge told her to remain behind. “Marta Schneider from Steffisburg, is that correct? What does your father do?”

“My father is a tailor and my mother is a dressmaker.”

“Ah!” She smiled. “That’s why you were staring. . . .” She looked at Marta’s shirtwaist and black skirt. “Did you make what you’re wearing?”

Wondering at the woman’s change in manner, Marta dipped just to be cautious. “Yes, Countess.”

The countess’s mouth curved with an odd, pleased smile. “Wonderful. You can make the uniforms.”

Marta stiffened. “Will I have spare time?”

“Most of your evenings will be free.”

Her evenings might be free, but she wasn’t. “If you have the materials, we can discuss wages.”

The countess’s dark eyes widened in surprise. “What would you demand?”

Marta made a swift mental calculation and named an elevated sum for the uniforms.

“That’s outrageous!” The countess named a lower price.

Marta raised it. “And if I am expected to provide the materials, I will require the funds for that in advance, and the rest paid before I hand over the uniforms.”

“You’ve been cheated, haven’t you?”

“I haven’t, but my father and mother have.”

“Is that any reason not to trust me?”

“This is business, Countess.”

The countess’s eyes lit up with amusement. After several rounds, she agreed on a price slightly above what Marta had decided was fair. When everything had been settled between them, the countess laughed. “Fräulein Schneider, you are not like any girl we’ve ever had before.” She shook her head, eyes sparkling. “I doubt you will ever be a proper servant.”

Marta wrote to Rosie and received a swift answer.

*What do you mean you doubt the Countess Saintonge is a countess?*

Letters flew back and forth with the speed of the trains.

*The countess sounds German one day and French the next. I heard C and C speaking English in the parlor yesterday, though they shut up fast enough when they saw me in the doorway. Actors, perhaps? Frau Yoder says it is impolite to ask. The pair of them could even be Swiss! I intend to take Mama’s good advice and learn all I can. . . .*

*Perhaps they are just very good at languages and have absorbed the proper accents. . . .*

*Did I forget to tell you C and C have parties every Friday and often have overnight guests on the weekend? C and C say everything is planned in order to train us. If that is true, then I am a cheesemaker’s daughter. I have said nothing of my suspicions in my letters home, but I will tell you. This house is large enough to need eight full-time maids to keep it clean and neat! C and C have taught us how to wash windows, floors, and chandeliers. Frau Yoder has taught us how to wax and polish banisters and floorboards. We dust figurines, beat dust from the drapes, clean rugs. We change beds. This place turns into a hotel from Friday night through Sunday afternoon. How can I not admire such audacity? C and C found a way to make servant girls pay for the privilege of maintaining their mansion!*

*Are you writing all this in your journal?*

*I’m saving the journal for better things.*

She had filled only one page, with recipes of the Beckers’ best-selling bakery goods.

* * *

Marta never worked Sundays. She walked down the hill and across the bridge, into the old city to attend services at the *Berner Münster*, the most famous gothic cathedral in Switzerland. She loved to linger at the portal, studying the carved and painted figures. Green

devils with red maws fell into hell while white and gilded angels flew to heaven. After church, Marta walked the *Marktgasse*, its arcades lined with shops bustling with customers. She bought chocolate and a pastry and sat near the Samson Fountain, thinking of Mama and Elise. She went to see the *Bundeshaus* and the *Rathaus*. She bought carrots and fed the brown bears at the *Bärengraben*, along with a dozen other visitors to Bern who had come to see the city's mascots. She liked to buy a cup of chocolate and stand beneath the western gate and clock tower, waiting for the show when the hour struck. By the end of two months, Marta knew every cobblestone street and fountain in the old city.

Mama and Elise sent a letter once a week. Nothing changed. Mama was making another dress for Frau Keller. Elise stitched the hem. Papa worked hard in the shop. Everyone was well.

*We miss you, Marta, and we count the days until you come home. . . .*

Every Sunday, before going back up the hill to the school, Marta sat near the fountain depicting Samson breaking the jaws of a lion and wrote to Mama and Elise. She told them what she was learning about housekeeping, leaving out her suspicions of the so-called count and countess. She described the city.

*I love Bern. Standing in the Marktgasse is like being inside one of Frau Fuchs's hives. . . .*

Rosie suggested she stay.

*Have you thought about living in Bern? Think of living in Zurich! Wherever you go, you must write and tell me everything!*

Near the end of her six-month course, Papa wrote.

*I expect you to return home as soon as you receive your certificate. Ask the count and countess for a recommendation.*

He enclosed enough francs to buy a one-way ticket to Steffisburg and a notice. *Schloss Thun* had an opening for a maid.

# Hoofstuk 3

Mamma maak haar die volgende oggend wakker toe dit nog donker is. Pappa gee Marta net genoeg geld om ’n eenrigtingkaartjie na Bern te koop.

“Ek sal vir jou genoeg stuur om by die huis te kom wanneer jy klaarmaak.” Hy gee vir haar die toelatingsbrief, bewys van betaling en ’n kaart van Bern met die skool se adres. “Jy beter jou litte roer. Die trein ry oor twee ure uit Thun.”

“Ek het gedink Pappa gaan saam met my.”

“Hoekom? Jy kan op jou eie daar kom.” Hy draai om en gaan winkel toe om vroeg te begin werk.

“Moenie so bekommerd lyk nie.”

“Ek het nog nooit met ’n trein gery nie, Mamma.”

Mamma gee haar ’n tergende glimlag. “Dis vinniger as ’n koets.” Mamma druk haar styf vas en gee haar die rugsak waarin sy ’n ekstra romp, twee bloesies, onderklere, ’n borsel en toiletware gepak het. Marta probeer nie wys hoe senuweeagtig sy voel om op haar eie weg te gaan nie. Sy is bly dat Elise nie wakker geword het nie, want as haar sussie begin huil het, sou Marta ook voor haar trane geswig het. Sy soen Mamma op haar koue wang en sê dankie. “Totsiens, Pappa!” roep sy.

“Jy beter gou maak!” bulder hy terug.

Mamma gaan saam met haar uit. Sy haal ’n klein beursie uit haar sak en gee dit vir Marta. “’n Paar frank vir skryfpapier, koeverte en posseëls.” Sy vou haar hande om Marta se gesig, soen haar twee maal en fluister in haar oor. “En koop vir jouself ’n beker warm sjokolade. Vind dan uit waar die Simsonfontein is. Dit was my gunsteling.” Sy slaan ’n arm om Marta en loop ’n entjie saam met haar. “Wanneer jy in die oggend opstaan, moet jy weet dat ek vir jou bid. En elke aand wanneer jy gaan slaap.” As die Here na enigiemand in die gesin luister, sal dit na Mamma wees wat so lief is vir Hom. “En wat jy ook al doen, Marta, doen dit soos vir die Here.”

“Ek sal, Mamma.”

Mamma laat haar gaan. Toe Marta omkyk, is haar ma se oë vol

trane. Sy lyk so broos. "Moenie van ons vergeet nie."

"Nooit nie." Marta wil terughardloop en haar vashou.

"Toe, jy gaan laat wees." Mamma waai.

Bang dat haar moed haar sal begewe, draai Marta vinnig om en begin haastig loop.

Hoe verder sy loop, hoe meer opgewonde word sy. Sy hardloop 'n ent van die pad en is pas by die stasie toe die kaartjiekantoor oopmaak. Haar hart bons toe die trein by die stasie intrek. Sy wag om te kyk wat die ander passasiers doen, en gee haar kaartjie vir die kondukteur voordat sy opklim. Sy skuifel deur 'n nou gangetjie, verby 'n man in 'n besigheidspak wat deur die papiere in sy aktetas grawe. Twee rye agter hom sit nog een, besig om boek te lees. 'n Vrou waarsku haar drie kinders om op te hou om mekaar te treiter.

Marta gaan sit in een van die agterste banke. Sy sit haar rugsak tussen haar voete neer en kyk deur die venster. Sy wip verskrik toe die trein ruk. Sy gryp na die sitplek voor haar en hou styf vas terwyl sy teen die paniek baklei. Hoe vinnig gaan hulle ry? Sê nou die trein jaag van die spore af? Moet sy nie sommer nou probeer afklim terwyl die trein nog in die stasie is nie? Die gedagte aan wat Pappa gaan sê en doen as sy by die voordeur opdaag, laat haar bly sit. Sy kyk na die ander passasiers en sien dat niemand anders hulle aan die geruk en gesis of die harde fluit steur nie. Sy sak agteroor en kyk hoe Thun voor die venster verbyflits.

Saam met die trein is dit asof haar hartklop ook versnel. Elke minuut neem haar verder van Mamma en Rosie en Elise af weg. Toe haar trane geluidloos en warm kom, vee sy hulle weg.

Die Aarerivier loop langs die treinspoor. Sy kyk deur die venster terwyl hulle deur heuwels met breë plaashuise ry waarvan die dakke amper aan die grond raak. Die trein hou by elke dorp stil, en sy leun na weerskante om soveel moontlik van die pleine en markte te sien. Sy sien ou brûe wat nog nie met klipstrukture vervang is nie. In elke dorpie is daar 'n kloktoring, selfs al is daar nie 'n stasie nie.

Die wiele tikke-tik, tikke-tik terwyl die trein na Bern toe voortspoed. Toe die buitewyke van die stad sigbaar word, tel Marta haar sak op en hou dit op haar skoot. Sy sien groot klipgeboue en 'n brug oor die groen Aare waar dit rondom die ou stad kronkel. Huise staan in rye aan die oorkant bokant die rivier. Sy kyk na haar kaart en weer deur die venster, onseker oor hoe om by die Saintonges se huishoudkundeskool uit te kom. Sy sal vir aanwysings moet vra.

Toe die trein in die stasie stilhou, klim Marta saam met die ander

mense af. Die gemaal van soveel liggame en die geroesemoes van stemme laat dit vir Marta voel asof sy in een van Frau Fuchs se byekorwe vasgevang is. Kondukteurs roep treinnommers uit. Stoom sis. Iemand stamp teen haar en maak vinnig verskoning voordat hy hom na sy trein toe haas. Sy sien ’n lang man in ’n swart uniform en rooi pet en gaan na hom toe. Toe sy haar kaart vir hom wys, beduie hy watter roete sy moet volg en sê hoe lank dit sal neem om die kort entjie te ry. “Jy kan die trem neem.”

Marta besluit om te loop. Sy wil ’n stukkie van die stad sien, en wie weet wanneer sy weer die geleentheid gaan hê om te doen wat sy wil. Moet hulle Saterdae ook skoolgaan? Sy weet nie. Buite die stasie loop sy in die rigting van ’n keisteenstraat wat tussen hoë klipgeboue en wapperende vlae deur loop. Sy gaan staan om te kyk hoe die geanimeerde figuurtjies in die kloktoring die uur slaan. Sy loop verby plazas en dwaal kruis en dwars deur arkades met kafeetjies, juwelierswinkels, klerewinkels, bakkerye en klein winkeltjies met sjokolade in die venster.

Teen sononder stap Marta haastig in die rigting van die brug oor die Aarerivier. Dan loop sy die bult uit totdat sy die straatnaam kry wat op die briefhoof aangebring is. Teen die tyd dat sy die regte adres bereik, is sy uitgeput maar opgewonde. Daar is nêrens ’n bordjie wat wys dat sy na die regte plek toe gekom het nie, en die huis voor haar lyk meer soos ’n deftige herehuis as ’n skool.

’n Vrou in ’n swart rok, wit voorskoot en kappie maak die deur oop.

Marta maak ’n ongemaklike kniebuiging. “Ek’s Marta Schneider van Steffisburg.” Sy hou haar dokumente uit.

“Moet nooit voor die personeel kniebuig nie,” sê die vrou toe sy die papiere neem, daarna kyk en wys dat sy moet inkom. “Welkom by die *Haushaltungsschule Bern*.”

Sy maak die deur agter Marta toe. “Ek’s Frau Yoder. Jy is die laaste van ons studente, Fräulein Schneider. Jy lyk moeg. Moet tog nie vir my sê jy het hiernatoe geloop nie?”

“Van die stasie af.” Marta kyk oopmond na die deftige trap en die mure met portrette in vergulde rame, die geweefde matte, die porseleinbeeldjies. Is dít ’n huishoudkundeskool?

“Die meeste mense ry hiernatoe.”

“Ek wou ’n bietjie van die stad sien.” Marta staar na die plafon wat met engele beskilder is. “Ek was nie seker wanneer ek weer tyd gaan hê om na die besienswaardighede te gaan kyk nie.”

“Julle het Sondae vry. Kom. Ek sal jou wys waar alles is. Die

sitkamer, woonkamer, die graaf se kantore en die gravin se konservatorium is op die eerste vloer. Die kombuis is aan die ander kant, langs die eetkamer. Op die tweede vloer is daar ’n balsaal en ’n paar groot slaapkamers. Die meeste van die gastekamers is op die derde vloer. Jy en die ander meisies slaap in die slaapsaal op die vierde vloer. Die klaskamer is ook daar.”

Frau Yoder loop kop omhoog en hande voor haar saamgevou. Sy steek haar hand uit om elke vertrek te identifiseer en gee vir Marta ’n paar sekondes om die luukse interieur te besigtig. “Die gravin ontvang gaste in hierdie sitkamer. Nadat sy verlede jaar by die *Schloss Schönbrunn* in Wene was, het sy die mure geel laat verf.” Sy lig ’n hand voordat sy albei weer voor haar saamvou. “Bo die kaggel hang daar ’n portret van die gravin. Is sy nie ’n beeldskone vrou nie?”

’n Jong vrou met donker oë en lang, vloeiende swart hare oor haar kaal skouers kyk op haar af. Die gravin dra ’n halssnoer met diamante en smaragte om haar fyn nek en haar rok lyk soos iets uit ’n geskiedenisboek wat Marta gelees het. “Sy lyk soos Marie Antoinette.”

“Kom ons hoop sy deel nie in haar lot nie.”

Haar woorde vang Marta half onkant, veral die feit dat sy dit in so ’n droë stem sê. Frau Yoder het weer begin loop. Marta volg, haar nuuskierigheid geprikkel. “Word die klasse deur die graaf en gravin aangebied?”

“Hulle sal by geleentheid met julle praat, maar ek behartig die onderrig.”

“Saintonge. Is hulle Frans?”

“Dit is nie beleefd om te vra nie, Fräulein.”

Marta bloos. “O.” *En hoekom nie?* wil sy vra, maar Frau Yoder is reeds voor haar uit. Marta voel soos ’n klein eendjie wat agter haar waggelende ma aanhardloop. “Hoeveel ander studente is daar, Frau Yoder?”

“Sewe.”

“Net sewe?”

Frau Yoder gaan staan en kyk om. Sy kyk uit die hoogte na Marta. “Net die heel belowendste kandidate word aanvaar.” Haar oë beweeg oor Marta. “Is jou jas op bestelling gemaak?”

Sy het dit self gemaak, maar voel nie daarna om dit vir die vrou te sê nie. “My ma en pa is albei kleremakers.”

Frau Yoder leun nader en kyk na die borduurwerk. “Lieflike werk.” Sy glimlag vir Marta. “Ek is verbaas dat jou ouers jou hiernatoe gestuur het. Kom.” Frau Yoder draai weer weg. “Ek wil jou die res van

die huis wys. As jy honger is, is daar koolsop en brood in die kombuis. Die graaf en gravin is uit vir die aand. Jy sal hulle môre-oggend tienuur in die klaskamer ontmoet. Ek wil julle egter al agtuur daar hê."

Marta se nuuskierigheid word nog groter toe sy gravin Saintonge vir die eerste keer op die kaal houtvloer buitekant die klaskamer sien staan. Sy lyk te jonk om die hoof van enigiets te wees, en sy is nie vreeslik besadig geklee nie. Haar wenkbroue boog oor haar donker oë. Toe sy sag lag, kan Marta haar klein, reguit wit tande sien. Sy fluister iets agter haar hand en 'n man kom te voorskyn. Hy het grys hare, ligte oë en 'n maer, hoekige gesig. Hy lyk oud genoeg om die gravin se pa te wees! Toe hy oorleun, dink Marta dat hy gravin Saintonge sommer daar en dan in die gang gaan soen, maar hy sê iets in 'n gedempte stem en verdwyn. Die gravin lyk ergerlik, maar sy lig haar kop voordat sy die vertrek hooghartig binnekom. "Goeiemôre, studente."

Almal is soos blits op hulle voete en kniebuig soos hulle aangesê is.

"Gravin." Frau Yoder maak 'n elegante kniebuiging. Elke meisie kniebuig weer wanneer haar naam genoem word.

Die gravin, haar hande delikaat voor haar middel saamgevou, praat oor die uitstekende reputasie van die *Haushaltungsschule Bern* en die positiewe terugvoer wat sy en die graaf van tevrede werkgewers ontvang het. "Ons kies net die beste." Marta het haar bedenkinge. Na 'n nag saam met die ander weet sy dat die meeste van hulle minder skoling as sy ontvang het. *Is ons die beste?*

"Dié wat die eerste drie maande van ons opleiding voltooi, sal vir een van ons uniforms gemeet word." Toe die gravin haar een hand lig, draai Frau Yoder stadig in die rondte sodat hulle haar uitrusting kan besigtig. Sy dra 'n enkellengte swart wolromp, wit bloesie met 'n hoë kragie en lang moue, 'n vollengte voorskoot met die letters *HB* op die regtersak geborduur, en 'n wit kappie met kantafwerking. "Slegs dié wat die kursus voltooi, ontvang die eer om een van ons uniforms te dra."

Terwyl die gravin praat, bestudeer Marta die linnerok met sy fyn opnaaisels, kantinsetsel, wit geborduurde blomme en blare, en krullerige *passementerie*. Sy weet hoeveel ure in die maak van so 'n rok ingaan.

"Fräulein Schneider, staan op."

Marta staan op, onseker oor waarom die gravin haar uitgesonder het.

"Ek verwag van jou om aandag te gee wanneer ek praat."

"Ja, Mevrou."

"Ja, *Gravin*. En jy sal kniebuig wanneer jy in die vervolg opstaan, en weer voordat jy praat."

Marta voel die hitte oor haar wange opskuif. 150 frank om te leer hoe om soos 'n slaaf behandel te word! 150 frank wat sy vir Pappa moet terugbetaal of sy die kursus voltooi of nie. Marta byt op haar tande en maak 'n kniebuiging. "Ja, Gravin." Sy kniebuig weer.

Gravin Saintonge bekyk haar met donker, koue oë. "Het jy enigiets gehoor wat ek gesê het of moet ek dit alles herhaal?"

Marta buig weer. "Ja, Gravin. Ek het gehoor." Sy begin om die gravin woordeliks aan te haal totdat die vrou een van haar delikate hande lig om haar stil te maak. Die gravin gee 'n effense knik om te wys sy kan sit. Marta bly staan. Die gravin knik 'n bietjie dieper. Marta kyk terug na haar. Die gravin se wange verkleur. "Hoekom staan jy nog, Fräulein Schneider?"

Marta kniebuig stadiger en 'n paar sentimeter laer. "Ek het op u bevel gewag, gravin Saintonge." Sy hoor die senuweeagtige geskuifel van die meisies rondom haar. Met nog 'n kniebuiging neem Marta haar sitplek in.

Aan die einde van die klas sê gravin Saintonge dat sy moet agterbly. "Marta Schneider van Steffisburg, is dit korrek? Wat doen jou pa vir 'n lewe?"

"Hulle is kleremakers."

"A!" Sy glimlag. "Dis dan waarom jy gestaar het." Sy kyk na Marta se bloesie en swart romp. "Het jy jou uitrusting gemaak?"

Onseker oor die verandering in die vrou se houding kniebuig Marta net om versigtig te wees. "Ja, Gravin."

Die gravin se mond vertrek in 'n vreemde, tevrede glimlag. "Wonderlik. Jy kan die uniforms maak."

Marta verstyf. "Gaan ek vrye tyd hê?"

"Die meeste van jou aande gaan vry wees."

Haar aande is dalk vry, maar sy is nie van plan om gratis te werk nie. "As u die materiaal gekry het, kan ons my betaling bespreek."

Die gravin se donker oë rek van verbasing. "Wat het jy in gedagte?"

Marta maak 'n vlugtige berekening en noem 'n hoë bedrag vir die uniforms.

"Dis verregaande!" Die gravin noem 'n laer prys.

Marta verhoog dit. "En as daar van my verwag word om die materiaal te voorsien, sal ek vooraf die nodige geld moet kry, en die

res voordat ek die uniforms oorhandig."

"Jy is al voorheen ingedoen, nie waar nie?"

"Nie ek nie, maar my pa en ma is."

"Het jy enige rede om my nie te vertrou nie?"

"Dis hoe 'n mens sake doen, Gravin."

Die gravin se oë verhelder geamuseerd. Na 'n paar rondtes kom hulle ooreen op 'n prys wat effens hoër is as wat Marta besluit het billik is. Toe alles tussen hulle uitgesorteer is, lag die gravin. "Fräulein Schneider, ek het nog nooit 'n meisie soos jy ontmoet nie." Sy skud haar kop en haar oë blink. "Ek weet nie of jy ooit 'n geskikte bediende gaan wees nie."

Marta skryf 'n brief vir Rosie en ontvang 'n vinnige antwoord.

*Wat bedoel jy jy twyfel of gravin Saintonge regtig 'n gravin is?*

Briewe vlieg teen die spoed van treine heen en weer.

*Die gravin klink die een dag Duits en die volgende Frans. Ek het die G en G gister in die sitkamer hoor Engels praat, maar hulle het vinnig stilgebly toe hulle my sien. Akteurs, miskien? Frau Yoder sê dis onbeleefd om te vra. Dis selfs moontlik dat hulle Switsers is! Ek is van plan om Mamma se goeie raad te volg en alles te leer wat ek kan ...*

*Dalk is hulle net baie goed in tale en het hulle die regte aksente bemeester ...*

*Het ek vergeet om vir jou te sê dat G en G elke Vrydag partytjies het en dat hulle oor naweke dikwels gaste het wat oorbly? G en G sê alles word gereël sodat ons opgelei kan word. As dit die geval is, is ek onder 'n kalkoen uitgebroei. Ek het niks van my vermoedens in my briewe huis toe gesê nie, maar ek sal jou vertel. Hierdie huis is groot genoeg vir agt voltydse bediendes om dit skoon en netjies te hou! G en G het ons geleer hoe om vensters, vloere en kandelare te was. Frau Yoder het ons geleer hoe om trapleunings en houtvloere te politoer. Ons stof beeldjies af, slaan stof uit gordyne, was matte. Ons maak beddens op. Van Vrydagaande tot Sondagmiddae verander hierdie plek in 'n hotel. Hoe kan ek nie bewondering vir sulke innovasie hê nie? G en G het 'n manier ontdek om bediendes te laat betaal vir die voorreg om hulle herehuis in stand te hou!*

*Skryf jy al hierdie goed in jou dagboek?*

*Ek hou my dagboek vir beter dinge.*

Sy het nog net een bladsy volgeskryf, met resepte van die Beckers se gewildste gebak.

* * *

Marta werk nooit op Sondae nie. Sy gaan die steilte af en oor die brug na die ou stad om die diens by die *Münster*, die bekendste gotiese katedraal in Switserland, te gaan bywoon. Sy talm graag in die portaal waar sy na die geverfde beeldjies kyk. Groen duiwels met rooi kele wat in die hel neerstort terwyl wit en goue engele na die hemel toe vlieg. Ná kerk loop Marta na die *Marktgasse* waar die winkels in die arkades 'n bedrywigheid van klante is. Sy koop sjokolade en 'n pasteitjie en wanneer sy naby die Simsonfontein gaan sit, dink sy aan Mamma en Elise. Sy gaan besigtig die *Bundeshaus* en die *Rathaus*. Sy koop wortels en voer die bruin bere by *Bärenplatz* saam met 'n klomp ander toeriste wat Bern kom besoek het om die stad se gelukbringers te sien. Sy koop graag 'n beker warm sjokolade en staan onder die westelike poort en Kloktoring en wag vir die vertoning wanneer die uur slaan. Aan die einde van twee maande ken Marta elke straat en fontein in die ou stad.

Mamma en Elise skryf een maal 'n week. Niks het verander nie. Mamma maak nog 'n rok vir Frau Keller. Elise help met die soom. Pappa werk hard in die winkel. Dit gaan goed met almal.

> *Ons mis jou, Marta, en ons tel die dae totdat jy huis toe kom …*

Voordat Marta Sondae teruggaan na die HB bo-op die heuwel, gaan sit sy naby die fontein van Simson en die leeu en skryf vir Mamma en Elise. Sy vertel hulle wat sy van huishoudkunde leer, maar rep niks van haar agterdog oor die sogenaamde graaf en gravin nie. Sy beskryf die stad.

> *Ek is mal oor Bern. Om in die Marktgasse te staan is soos om in een van Frau Fuchs se byekorwe te wees …*

Rosie stel voor dat sy aanbly.

> *Het jy dit al oorweeg om in Bern te bly? Dink net hoe dit sal wees om in Zürich te woon! Waar jy ook al gaan, jy moet skryf en my alles vertel!*

Toe die ses maande einde se kant toe staan, skryf Pappa.

> *Ek verwag van jou om dadelik huis toe te kom sodra jy jou sertifikaat ontvang. Vra die graaf en gravin vir 'n aanbevelingsbrief.*

Hy stuur genoeg geld om 'n eenrigtingkaartjie na Steffisburg te koop sowel as 'n kennisgewing. *Schloss Thun* het 'n vakature vir 'n bediende.

## Chapter 4

On graduation day from the *Haushaltungsschule Bern,* Marta received a fancy diploma, a letter of recommendation signed by Count and Countess Saintonge, and a uniform with *HB* embroidered in black silk on the pocket of the white apron. She also had the francs she had earned tucked into the purse Mama had given her. She boarded the early train home. When she arrived in Thun, she went straight to the castle and asked to speak to the mistress of housekeeping.

When Frau Schmidt came into the office, Marta took an immediate, instinctive dislike to the woman as she looked down at Marta with disdain. “You asked to see me, Fräulein?”

Marta handed over her documents. The woman put on wire spectacles to read them. “You will have to do.” She handed the documents back to Marta. “You can start right away.”

“What pay do you offer?”

Frau Schmidt looked affronted. She took off her spectacles and tucked them into a small case on a chain around her neck. “Twenty francs.”

“A week?”

“A month.”

Marta forgot all the lessons Frau Yoder had taught on diplomacy. “An untrained dishwasher is paid more than twenty francs a month!”

Frau Schmidt harrumphed. “Everyone understands what a great honor it is to work in *Schloss Thun,* Fräulein!”

“As great an honor as working at the *Haushaltungsschule Bern,* I imagine.” She tucked her documents back into her knapsack. “No wonder the position is still open. Who but a fool would take it!”

When Marta arrived home, before Mama could reach her, Elise let out a cry of pleasure and flew into her arms. As Marta held Elise, she saw the changes that had occurred in Mama during the six months she had been in Bern. Dismayed, she set Elise aside. Mama patted her cheek rather than embrace Marta, who took her hand and kissed it.

Papa barely raised his head from the garment he fed through his sewing machine. “When do you plan to apply for that job at the castle? You should go now or it’ll be gone.”

Marta looked over her shoulder. “You could welcome me home, Papa.”

He raised his head and gave her a cold glare.

“I went to the castle before coming here. I turned down their

offer."

His face reddened. "You did what?"

"I assume you sent me to school so that I would earn more than twenty francs a month, Papa."

"Twenty francs!" He looked taken aback. "That's all the castle pays?"

"Frau Schmidt looked like Frau Keller's twin sister. She seemed to think the great honor of working there is worth the lesser pay."

Papa shook his head and pumped the sewing machine pedals. "The sooner you find work, the sooner you can repay the money you owe me."

She'd hoped he might congratulate her on her graduation, that he might feel some pleasure in having his elder daughter home. She should have known better. "I'll start looking first thing tomorrow morning, Papa." He'd get his tuition and book money, though there had been no books! How she wished she could tell him he'd been duped, but he'd only take it out on her. Nor did she dare take the satisfaction of telling him she'd earned back twice what he paid those two scoundrels by demanding a fair wage.

Mama looked tired, but happy. "It's so good to have you home." She coughed. Unable to stop, she sank into her chair, covering her mouth with a soiled rag. When the spasm finally ended, she looked drained and gray.

Elise looked at Marta. "It's been worse the last month."

"What does the doctor say?"

"She doesn't go to the doctor." Papa pulled the garment carefully from the machine. "Doctors cost money."

Marta got up early the next morning and prepared coffee and *Birchermüsli* so Mama wouldn't have to do it.

Mama came into the kitchen looking drawn and pale. "You're up so early."

"I wanted to talk with you before I go out." She took Mama's hand and folded the francs she'd earned into it.

Mama gasped. "How did you come by so much money?"

"I made the school uniforms." She kissed her mother's cold cheek and whispered. "I did spend a few francs on chocolate and pastries, Mama. I want you to see the doctor. Please . . ."

"It's no use, Marta. I know what's wrong." Mama tried to press the money back into Marta's hand. "I have consumption."

"Oh, Mama." She started to cry. "Surely he can do something."

“They say the mountain air helps. You must put this away for your future.”

“No!” Marta tucked them deeply into Mama’s apron pocket. “See Dr. Zimmer. Please, Mama.”

“And what would Papa say if I went?”

“Papa doesn’t have to know everything. And don’t worry about his money. He’ll get it.” *A little at a time.*

* * *

Marta found a job in the kitchen of the *Hotel auf dem Nissau*, famed for its magnificent view of the mountains. A dining platform had been built above the hotel, and guests made the climb each morning, enjoying a sumptuous breakfast and the sunrise.

After less than a month, Chef Fischer told Marta to report to the supervisor for reassignment. Herr Lang told her she would carry trays of meals up and dirty dishes down the mountain. Her pay would also be lowered, and she would receive only a small share of the servers’ tips.

“What did I do wrong, Herr Lang?”

“I don’t know, but Chef Fischer was furious. She wanted you dismissed. What did you do yesterday?”

“I measured out the meats and spices for her sausage. I had everything—” She grew indignant. “Why are you laughing?”

“You were too helpful, Fräulein.” He snapped his fingers and motioned to a woman in the blue *Dirndl* costume of the restaurant. “Guida will show you what to do. You’ll need to change into a *Dirndl* before you can go up to the platform.”

As Guida searched through the rack of uniforms in a small dressing room, Marta grumbled about being kicked out of the kitchen. “I could make her sausages if she wanted to take a day off.”

“You’re a sharp one, aren’t you? You’re fortunate Chef Fischer didn’t stick a fork in your back! The old crone guards her recipes the way a banker guards his vault. No one is allowed to know what she puts in her sausage. She’s famous for it.”

“I wondered why my questions always annoyed her. I thought she expected me to figure out things for myself.” It had taken three weeks of watching before Marta finally figured out all the ingredients and proper portions. She recorded everything in the book Rosie had given her.

On her way home, she ordered beef, pork, and veal from the butcher, asking him to grind them and have everything ready on

Saturday. She purchased the spices she would need, then worked late into the night so the family would have Fischer sausages, *Rösti*—fried potatoes—tomatoes Fribourg-style, and cherry bread pudding for dessert.

She set aside enough for Rosie to sample.

Pleased, she watched her family devour the meal. Mama and Elise complimented her cooking. Even Hermann had something nice to say. Papa paid her no compliments, but when Hermann reached for the last sausage, Papa got his fork into it first.

* * *

"I hope you like it, Rosie." She bit her lip, watching her friend sample the sausage. "I didn't use all of the spices Frau Fischer does, but I added some allspice."

Rosie raised her head, eyes gleaming. "It's wonderful!" She spoke with cheeks bulging. "Mama would die for this recipe."

"I'll write it out for her." Marta flopped back on the spring grass and put her hands behind her head. "I have others, too, for *Streusel*, *Jägerschnitzel*, and *Züricher Geschnetzeltes*."

Rosie licked her fingers. "Are you going to start a restaurant?"

Marta snickered. "And have Frau Fischer coming after me with her meat cleaver?" She looked up at the cloudless blue sky and allowed herself to dream. "No. I'm just collecting the best so that someday, when I have a hotel or boardinghouse, I'll know how to cook well enough to keep my guests happy."

"They'll be happy and fat!" Rosie laughed. She flopped back beside Marta. "It's good to have you home, and not just because you've learned how to make the best sausage I've ever tasted!"

"I'm not going to stay long."

"What do you mean?"

"Every muscle in my body aches. I'm nothing more than a pack mule carrying trays up and down the mountain. I need to find another job where I can learn more. And there are none in Steffisburg or Thun."

Rosie grinned. "Think of the honor of working inside the walls of *Schloss Thun*!"

"Very funny."

"Go to Interlaken, then. It's not so far away you couldn't come home every few weeks to visit. We could still have our walks in the hills. My father could help you. He knows the manager of the *Germania Hotel*."

Herr Gilgan was more than willing. He wrote Marta a letter of recommendation. "Derry Weib always needs good workers. I'll send him a wire." A few days later, he told Marta that Herr Weib needed an assistant cook. "He'll pay fifty francs a month, and you'll have a room off the kitchen."

Mama congratulated Marta on her good fortune. Papa didn't care where she worked as long as she paid him twenty francs a month. Elise took the news poorly. "How long will you be gone this time? And don't tell me to sleep with the cat. She purrs and keeps me awake."

"Grow up, Elise!"

Her sister burst into tears and turned to Mama for comfort, then felt too sick to attend church the next day.

"Mama, you can't keep coddling her."

"She has such a tender heart. She's easily bruised."

When services ended, Papa stood talking with other business owners, discussing hard times. Hermann went off with his friends. Mama tucked Marta's hand into the crook of her arm. "Let's take a walk. It's been a while since I've gone up the hill to the meadow. Remember how we used to walk there when you were a little girl?" They stopped several times along the way. "You've been restless all week, Marta. Something's on your mind."

"I'm worried about you, Mama. You work too hard."

She patted Marta's hand. "I do what needs to be done, and I enjoy it."

She sighed. "So you're going to Interlaken. I think this will be the beginning of a long journey for you." She walked more and more slowly, each breath more difficult. When they came to the bench near the road to *Hotel Edelweiss*, Mama could go no further. "When I was a girl, I walked all day in the hills." Her lips had turned a faint tinge of blue despite the warmth of the afternoon.

"We should go back, Mama."

"Not yet. Let me sit awhile in the sunshine." Mama didn't look down over Steffisburg, but up at the heavens. A dozen finches flew by, chittering as they landed among the branches of a nearby tree. A crow had come too near a nest and smaller birds attacked wildly, driving it away. Mama's eyes shone with tears. "Papa called you a cuckoo bird, once."

"I remember."

She had been five or six at the time, and Papa had flown into one

of his drunken rages. He grabbed her by the hair and shoved her across the room to the mirror. "Look at you! You're nothing like your mother! You're nothing like me! Dark hair and muddy eyes. It's like some cuckoo laid her egg in our nest and left us stuck with her ugly chick. Who will be fool enough to take you off my hands?" Papa had let go of her so abruptly, Marta fell against the mirror and cracked it. "And now bad luck on top of everything else!"

Tears slipped down Mama's cheeks. "You cried for hours. I tried to explain he'd been drinking and didn't know what he was saying."

"He knew, Mama. That's what hurt so much."

Mama sighed. She took Marta's hand firmly. "You have my mother's eyes. She didn't like your father. She didn't want me to marry him."

"Maybe you should have listened."

"Then I wouldn't have had Hermann or you or Elise. The three of you are my greatest blessings in life. I've never been sorry."

"Never?"

"God permits suffering. He permits injustice. I know your father can be cruel and selfish at times. But there were tender moments in the beginning. He lives with bitter disappointment. He's never learned to count his blessings. If you are to rise above your circumstances, you must learn that, *Liebling*." She took Marta's hand again. "Don't worry so much about me. I learned a long time ago to take my pain to Christ, who understands suffering so much more than I." She closed her eyes. "I imagine Jesus gathering me in His arms and lifting me onto His lap and holding me there like a child cradled against a mother's heart. His words are full of comfort. He strengthens me in my weakness."

She opened her eyes and smiled at Marta. "You won't welcome this, Marta. But you are more like your father than you are like me. You have his passion and ambition. You want more than life has given you." She sighed deeply. "And I love him. I have always loved him and always will, despite his faults and frailties."

"I know, Mama. I just wish your life could be easier."

"And if it were easier, would I have given my heart so fully to God? Wherever you go, let Christ be your refuge. Put your hope in Him, and you won't be disappointed by what life offers."

Mama lifted her head again. "Look at the birds, *Liebling*." Shivering despite the warm day, Mama drew her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. "Most species fly in a flock." A tear ran down her white cheek. "An eagle flies alone."

Marta felt her throat tighten. Pressing her lips together, she closed her eyes.

Mama put both hands around Marta's. "You have my blessing, Marta. I give it to you wholeheartedly and without reservation. You have my love. And I will pray for you every day of my life. Don't be afraid to leave."

"What about Elise, Mama?"

Mama smiled. "Elise is our lovely little barn swallow. She'll never fly far from home."

They walked down the hill together, Mama leaning into Marta for support. "Don't come home too often. There may come a time when your father won't let you go."

## Hoofstuk 4

Die dag toe Marta haar sertifikaat van die *Haushaltungsschule Bern* ontvang, kry sy ook 'n aanbevelingsbrief wat deur die graaf en gravin Saintonge onderteken is sowel as 'n uniform met 'n *HB* wat in swart sy op die sak van die wit voorskoot geborduur is. Sy het ook die bietjie geld wat sy verdien het, in die beursie gebêre wat Mamma vir haar gegee het. Sy neem die vroeë trein huis toe. Toe sy in Thun aankom, gaan sy reguit na die kasteel en vra om met die huishoudster te praat.

Toe Frau Schmidt by die kantoor inkom, het Marta 'n onmiddellike, instinktiewe teësin in die vrou wat minagtend op haar neerkyk. "Jy het gevra om my te sien, Fräulein?"

Marta oorhandig haar dokumente. Die vrou sit 'n brilletjie op om te lees. "Jy sal seker maar moet deug." Sy gee die dokumente terug vir Marta. "Jy kan dadelik begin."

"Wat is julle bereid om te betaal?"

Frau Schmidt lyk geaffronteer. Sy haal haar bril af en bêre dit in 'n klein houertjie wat aan 'n ketting om haar nek hang. "20 frank."

"Per week?"

"Per maand."

Marta vergeet al die lesse wat Frau Yoder hulle oor takt geleer het. "'n Onopgeleide skottelgoedwasser word meer as 20 frank betaal!"

Frau Schmidt maak 'n ergerlike geluid. "Almal weet wat 'n groot eer dit is om in *Schloss Thun* te werk, Fräulein!"

"Seker net so 'n groot eer soos om by die *Haushaltungsschule Bern* te werk." Sy steek haar dokumente weer in haar rugsak. "Dis geen wonder die pos is nog nie gevul nie. Net 'n swaap sal vir so 'n loon werk!"

Marta kom by die huis en nog voordat Mamma by haar is, gee Elise 'n gilletjie van blydskap en werp haar in Marta se arms. Terwyl sy Elise vashou, sien sy die veranderings wat die afgelope ses maande in Mamma plaasgevind het. Dis met ontsteltenis dat sy Elise laat gaan. In plaas daarvan om haar te omhels, raak Mamma aan haar wang. Marta neem haar hand en soen dit.

Pappa kyk skaars op van die kledingstuk wat hy besig is om deur sy naaimasjien te voer. “Wanneer is jy van plan om vir daardie werk by die kasteel te gaan aansoek doen? Jy beter nou dadelik gaan voordat hulle iemand anders kry.”

Marta kyk oor haar skouer. “Pappa kan my ten minste terugverwelkom.”

Hy lig sy kop en gluur kil na haar.

“Ek het op pad huis toe by die kasteel aangegaan. Ek het hulle aanbod van die hand gewys.”

Sy gesig word rooi. “Jy het wat?”

“Ek neem aan Pappa het my skool toe gestuur sodat ek meer as 20 frank ’n maand kan verdien.”

“20 frank!” Hy lyk uit die veld geslaan. “Is dit al wat die kasteel betaal?”

“Frau Schmidt lyk soos Frau Keller se tweelingsuster. Sy dink skynbaar dis so ’n groot eer om daar te werk dat hulle ’n mens minder kan betaal.”

Pappa skud sy kop en trap die naaimasjien se pedale. “Hoe gouer jy werk kry, hoe gouer kan jy my die geld betaal wat jy my skuld.”

Sy het gehoop dat hy haar met haar sertifikaat sou gelukwens, dat hy darem net ’n bietjie bly sou wees om sy oudste dogter by die huis te hê. Sy moes van beter geweet het. “Ek sal môre-oggend gaan kyk of ek iets kan kry, Pappa.” Hy sal sy geld terugkry, al was daar geen boeke nie! Sy wens sy kon hom vertel dat hulle om die bos gelei is, maar hy sal dit net op haar uithaal. Sy durf ook nie die bevrediging smaak om vir hom te sê dat sy op ’n regverdige loon aangedring het en sodoende twee maal terugverdien het as wat hy daardie twee jakkalse betaal het nie.

Mamma lyk moeg maar gelukkig. “Dit is so goed om jou by die huis te hê.” Sy begin hoes en toe sy nie kan ophou nie, sak sy op haar stoel neer en hou ’n gebruikte lap voor haar mond. Toe die spasma uiteindelik ophou, lyk sy uitgemergel en vaalgrys.

Elise kyk na Marta. “Dit het die laaste maand erger geword.”

“Wat sê die dokter?”

“Sy gaan nie dokter toe nie.” Pappa haal die kledingstuk versigtig uit die masjien. “Dokters kos geld.”

Marta staan die volgende oggend vroeg op en maak koffie en *Bircher-müsli* sodat Mamma dit nie hoef te doen nie.

Toe Mamma by die kombuis inkom, lyk sy afgemat en bleek. “Jy het so vroeg opgestaan.”

“Ek wou met Mamma gepraat het voordat ek uitgaan.” Sy neem Mamma aan die hand en vou die geld wat sy verdien het daarin toe.

Mamma snak na haar asem. “Waar het jy so baie geld gekry?”

“Ek het die skooluniforms gemaak.” Sy druk ’n sagte soen op haar ma se wang en fluister: “Ek het darem ’n paar frank op sjokolade en pasteitjies spandeer. Ek wil hê Mamma moet dokter toe gaan. Asseblief ... ”

“Dit gaan nie help nie, Marta. Ek weet wat fout is.” Mamma probeer om die geld in Marta se hand terug te druk. “Ek het longtering.”

“Ag, Mamma.” Sy begin huil. “Hy moet tog iets kan doen.”

“Hulle sê die berglug help. Jy moet dit vir jou toekoms wegbêre.”

“Nee!” Marta druk die geld diep in haar ma se voorskootsak. “Gaan sien dr. Zimmer. Asseblief, Mamma.”

“En wat sal Pappa sê as ek gaan?”

“Pappa hoef nie alles te weet nie. En moenie oor sy geld bekommerd wees nie. Hy sal dit kry.” *’n Bietjie op ’n slag.*

* * *

Marta kry ’n werk in die kombuis van die *Hotel auf dem Nissau*, beroemd vir sy ongelooflike uitsig op die berge. ’n Dek is bokant die hotel gebou en die gaste klim elke oggend soontoe om ’n heerlike ontbyt en die sonskyn te geniet.

Na minder as ’n maand word Marta deur sjef Fischer aangesê om die bestuurder te gaan sien in verband met hertoewysing. Herr Lang deel haar mee dat sy skinkborde met kos boontoe sal dra en die vuil skottelgoed sal terugbring. Sy gaan minder betaal word en gaan net ’n klein deel van die kelners se fooitjies verdien.

“Wat het ek verkeerd gedoen, Herr Lang?”

“Ek weet nie, maar sjef Fischer was woedend. Sy wou hê ek moet jou afdank. Wat het jy gister gedoen?”

“Ek het die vleis en speserye vir haar wors voorberei. Ek het alles – ” Sy vererg haar. “Hoekom lag jy?”

“Jy was te hulpvaardig, Fräulein.” Hy klap sy vingers en wys na ’n vrou in die blou *Dirndl*-kostuum van die restaurant. “Guida sal jou wys wat om te doen. Jy sal in ’n *Dirndl* moet verander voordat jy na die dek toe kan opgaan.”

Terwyl Guida na ’n uniform in ’n klein kleedkamer soek, mor Marta oor die feit dat sy uit die kombuis geskop is. “Ek kon haar wors

gemaak het as sy sou besluit om ’n dag af te vat.”

“Jy lyk nogal na ’n slim enetjie. Jy kan bly wees sjef Fischer het jou nie met ’n vurk in die rug gesteek nie! Die ou feeks beskerm haar resepte soos ’n bankbestuurder sy kluis. Niemand mag weet wat sy in haar wors sit nie. Sy is bekend daarvoor.”

“Ek het nogal gewonder hoekom my vrae haar altyd so kwaad gemaak het. Ek het gedink sy verwag van my om dit self uit te pluis.” Dit het drie weke geneem voordat Marta uiteindelik al die bestanddele en die regte hoeveelhede vasgestel het. Sy het alles neergeskryf in die boek wat Rosie vir haar gegee het.

Op pad huis toe bestel sy bees-, vark- en kalfsvleis by die slagter en vra hom om dit te maal en teen Saterdag gereed te hê. Sy koop die nodige speserye en werk tot laatnag sodat die gesin Fischerwors, *Rösti* gebraaide aartappels, tamaties Fribourg-styl en kersiebroodpoeding vir nagereg sal hê.

Sy hou genoeg eenkant sodat Rosie dit kan toets.

Sy kyk tevrede hoe haar gesin die maaltyd verslind. Mamma en Elise komplimenteer haar met haar kookkuns. Selfs Hermann het iets moois om te sê. Pappa gee haar nie ’n enkele kompliment nie, maar toe Hermann na die laaste worsie reik, het Pappa reeds sy vurk daarin gesteek.

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“Ek hoop jy hou daarvan, Rosie.” Sy byt op haar lip terwyl haar vriendin ’n stukkie wors toets. “Ek het nie al die speserye gebruik wat Frau Fischer gebruik nie, maar ek het ’n bietjie gemengde speserye bygevoeg.”

Rosie kyk op, haar oë blink. “Dis wonderlik!” Sy praat met bolwange. “Mamma sal haar oogtande gee vir hierdie resep.”

“Ek sal dit vir haar neerskryf.” Marta lê agteroor op die lentegras met haar hande onder haar kop. “Ek het nog ander, vir *Streusel, Jungfrau Schnitzel* en Zürich *Geschnetzeltes*.”

Rosie lek haar vingers af. “Gaan jy ’n restaurant oopmaak?”

Marta lag. “Sodat Frau Fischer my met haar vleismes agternasit?” Sy kyk op na die wolklose blou hemel en gee haar gedagtes vrye teuels. “Nee. Ek versamel net die bestes sodat ek eendag wanneer ek ’n hotel of losieshuis het, sal weet hoe om lekker genoeg te kook om my gaste gelukkig te hou.”

“Hulle sal gelukkig én rond wees!” Rosie lag. Sy gaan sit langs Marta op die gras. “Dis goed om jou terug te hê, en nie net omdat jy geleer het hoe om die lekkerste wors te maak wat ek al ooit geproe het nie!”

“Ek gaan nie lank bly nie.”

“Wat bedoel jy?”

“Elke spier in my lyf is seer. Ek is niks meer as ’n pakdonkie wat skinkborde bergop en bergaf dra nie. Ek wil ’n ander werk hê waar ek meer kan leer. En daar is niks in Steffisburg of Thun nie.”

Rosie lag. “Dink net aan die eer van ’n loopbaan agter die mure van *Schloss Thun*!”

“Baie snaaks.”

“Gaan dan Interlaken toe. Dis nie so ver dat jy nie elke paar weke kan kom kuier nie. Ons kan nog steeds in die berge gaan stap. My pa kan jou help. Hy ken die bestuurder van die *Germania Hotel*.”

Herr Gilgan is meer as gewillig. Hy skryf vir Marta ’n aanbevelingsbrief. “Derry Weib is altyd op soek na goeie werkers. Ek sal vir hom ’n telegram stuur.” ’n Paar dae later sê hy vir Marta dat Herr Weib ’n assistentkok benodig. “Hy betaal 50 frank ’n maand en jy sal ’n kamer langs die kombuis hê.”

Mamma is saam met Marta bly oor die geleentheid. Pappa gee nie om waar sy werk nie, solank sy hom 20 frank ’n maand betaal. Elise hanteer die nuus nie goed nie. “Hoe lank gaan jy hierdie keer weg wees? En moenie sê die kat moet by my slaap nie. Sy spin en hou my wakker.”

“Word groot, Elise!”

Haar sussie bars uit in trane en wend haar tot Mamma vir troos.

“Mamma kan nie aanhou om haar so op te piep nie.”

“Sy het so ’n sagte hart. Sy kry maklik seer.”

Toe die kerk Sondag uitkom, staan Pappa by die ander mans en gesels oor swaar tye. Hermann verdwyn saam met sy vriende. Mamma haak by Marta in. “Kom ons gaan stap ’n entjie. Ek kan nie onthou wanneer laas ek bo in die weiveld was nie. Onthou jy hoe ons altyd soontoe geloop het toe jy klein was?” Hulle rus ’n paar maal langs die pad. “Jy was die hele week lank rusteloos, Marta. Wat pla?”

“Ek is bekommerd oor Mamma. Mamma werk te hard.”

Sy gee Marta se hand ’n drukkie. “Ek doen wat gedoen moet word en ek geniet dit.” Sy sug. “Dus het jy besluit om Interlaken toe te gaan. Ek dink dit gaan vir jou die begin van ’n lang reis wees.” Sy loop al hoe stadiger en haar asem kom swaarder. Toe hulle die bankie naby

die pad na *Hotel Edelweiss* bereik, kan Mamma nie verder nie. "Toe ek 'n dogtertjie was, was ek heeldag in die berge." Ondanks die warm middag is daar 'n effense blou tint op haar lippe.

"Ons moet liewer teruggaan, Mamma."

"Nie nou al nie. Ek wil 'n rukkie in die son sit." Mamma kyk nie af na Steffisburg nie, maar na die blou lig bo hulle. 'n Swerm lewerike vlieg verby en gaan sit kwetterend op die takke van 'n boom naby hulle. 'n Kraai het dit te naby aan 'n nes gewaag en die kleiner voëls loods 'n aggressiewe aanval. Mamma se oë blink van die trane. "Pappa het jou eens op 'n tyd 'n koekoek genoem."

"Ek onthou."

Sy was vyf of ses en Pappa het een van sy dronk woedeuitbarstings gehad. Hy het haar aan die hare gegryp en haar na die oorkant van die vertrek geslinger waar die spieël gestaan het. "Kyk net na jou! Jy's glad nie soos jou ma nie! Jy's glad nie soos ek nie! Donker hare met grondbruin oë. Dis asof 'n koekoek haar eier in ons nes gelê het en ons moet met haar lelike kuiken opgeskeep sit. Wie gaan dom genoeg wees om jou by my oor te neem?" Pappa het haar so skielik gelos dat Marta teen die spieël geval en dit gekraak het. "En nou moet jy ook nog ongeluk oor ons bring!"

Die trane loop oor Mamma se wange. "Jy het ure lank gehuil. Ek het probeer verduidelik dat hy dronk was en nie geweet het wat hy sê nie."

"Hy het geweet, Mamma. Dis wat so seergemaak het."

Mamma sug. Sy hou Marta se hand styf vas. "Jy het my ma se oë. Sy het nie van jou pa gehou nie. Sy wou nie hê ek moes met hom trou nie."

"Miskien moes Mamma geluister het."

"Dan sou ek nie vir Hermann of jou of Elise gehad het nie. Ek sal julle drie vir niks ter wêreld verruil nie. Ek was nog nooit jammer nie."

"Nooit nie?"

"God bewaar ons nie altyd teen swaarkry nie. Hy spaar ons nie altyd van ongeregtigheid nie. Ek weet jou pa kan soms wreed en selfsugtig wees. Maar aan die begin was daar mooi, teer oomblikke. Hy lewe met bitter teleurstelling. Hy het nog nooit geleer om sy seëninge te tel nie. As jy bo jou omstandighede wil uitstyg, moet jy leer om dit te doen, *Liebling*." Sy neem Marta se hand weer in hare. "Moenie so bekommerd oor my wees nie. Ek het lank gelede geleer om my pyn na Christus toe te neem. Hy verstaan soveel beter as ek wat dit beteken

om te ly.” Sy sluit haar oë. “Ek sien hoe Jesus my in sy arms optel en my op sy skoot sit en my soos ’n kind teen haar ma se bors vashou. Sy woorde is vol troos en versterk my wanneer ek swak is.”

Sy maak haar oë oop en glimlag vir Marta. “Jy gaan nie hiervan hou nie, Marta. Maar jy is meer soos jou pa as soos ek. Jy het sy passie en ambisie. Jy soek meer as wat die lewe jou gegee het.” Sy sug diep. “En ek is lief vir hom. Ek het hom nog altyd liefgehad, en sal hom altyd lief- hê, ten spyte van sy foute en swakhede.”

“Ek weet, Mamma. Ek wens net dat Mamma se lewe makliker kon wees.”

“As dit makliker was, weet ek nie of ek my hart so volkome aan God sou oorgee nie. Wanneer jy gaan, moet jy die Here jou skuilplek maak. As jy op Hom vertrou, sal jy nie teleurgestel word deur wat die lewe jou bied nie.”

Mamma kyk weer op. “Kyk na die voëls, *Liebling*.” Sy bewe ten spyte van die warm dag en trek haar sjaal stywer om haar skouers. “Die meeste voëls vlieg in ’n swerm.” ’n Traan loop stadig oor haar bleek wang. “’n Arend vlieg alleen.”

Marta se keel voel stram. Sy pers haar lippe opmekaar en sluit haar oë.

Mamma vou Marta se hande toe in hare. “Jy het my seën, Marta. Ek gee dit volkome en onvoorwaardelik. Jy het my liefde. En solank ek lewe, sal ek elke dag vir jou bid. Moenie bang wees om weg te gaan nie.”

“Wat van Elise, Mamma?”

Mamma glimlag. “Elise is ons lieflike klein swaeltjie. Sy sal nooit ver van die huis af vlieg nie.”

Mamma moet teen Marta leun toe hulle saam afloop. “Moenie te dikwels huis toe kom nie. Daar gaan dalk ’n tyd kom wanneer jou pa jou nie sal laat gaan nie.”

## Chapter 5

**1904**

Marta slipped into the small room off the kitchen, momentarily escaping the infernal heat of the stoves. She wilted onto her cot and dabbed the sweat from her face with the towel she kept over her shoulder. Leaning back against the stone wall, she sighed in relief. On the other side flowed the River Aare that ran between the *Thunersee* and *Brienzersee*. Constant moisture seeped through the mortar, making icicles in winter and sprouting with mushrooms through summer.

"Marta!" the chef, Warner Brennholtz, shouted from the kitchen. *"Marta!"*

"Give me a minute or I'll melt faster than your chocolate!" She hadn't had a break all evening, and Herr Weib had brought her a letter from Mama. She took it from her apron pocket, tore it open, and began to read.

*My dearest Marta,*

> *I hope you are well and happy. I hold you close to my heart and pray for you unceasingly. I have sad news. Papa had to go to Bern and fetch Elise home from the housekeeping school. Countess Saintonge said she is unfit for service.*
>
> *Papa didn't go the first time they wrote. He thought Elise would adjust. But he had to go when the count wired him to come for Elise or pay the expenses of having her escorted home.*
>
> *The count refused to return a single franc. He said she had taken space that should have been given to another girl, and he would not accept the loss. That was bad enough, but he made it worse by telling Papa a father should know whether his own child could bear separation from her family. I know God has a lesson for all of us in this.*

"Oh, Mama." Her mother had unwittingly encouraged Elise's dependence, but the full responsibility couldn't be laid at her feet. Marta blamed herself for giving Papa the money to send Elise to Bern. He had made her feel so guilty when she had said no the first time.

*"If you loved your sister . . . if you weren't so grasping and selfish . . . You think nothing of your family. . . . You hoard your francs when they could help. . . ."*

She should have told Papa how he'd been duped by those two counterfeits in Bern. Instead, she'd convinced herself Elise might benefit by getting away. Perhaps she would blossom among the other

girls her age and enjoy Bern as much as Marta had. Marta had sent extra francs to Elise and told her to walk the *Marktgasse* and buy some chocolate and pastries at the *Café Français*.

Now, all she could do was pray Papa wouldn't take out his anger on Elise.

Marta lifted the letter and continued reading.

*Please don't be angry with her. I know it was your money wasted, but Elise did try. She managed to stay three weeks before she wrote the first time. And she suffers now. Papa hasn't spoken a word to her since he brought her home.*

*Elise helps me as much as she can. Her stitches are as fine as mine now. She will learn to work faster with more experience. She also helps Frau Zimmer with little Evrard. He is so dear, but he's at that age when he's into everything. He got away from her for a few minutes the other day. She is keeping closer watch now.*

*Write soon, Liebling. Your letters are a great comfort to us all. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May His face shine upon you. I love you.*

*Mama*

Marta folded the letter and tucked it back into her apron pocket. She would write and tell Mama to make Elise go to the market. She needed to learn to talk with people. She could buy the bread from the Beckers and talk with Frau Fuchs about more honey. Elise needed to learn to stand on her own. She wouldn't always have Mama.

The clatter of china went on in the other room. Warner Brennholtz shouted an impatient order to someone. Her door banged open and the chef stepped into her room. She had long since learned not to be surprised or offended when someone barged in. The heat of the kitchen made escape necessary, and her small bedroom was convenient. All day from breakfast through dinner, workers danced around one another, and someone would regularly slide in for a few minutes of cool respite before facing the stoves and ovens again. Only after the last customers had gone and the last dishes had been washed and put away did Marta have any privacy.

Brennholtz stood taller than Papa and several stones heavier. He liked his beer, too, but became jolly when he overimbibed, rather than moody or violent like her father. "What's the matter with you? You look like you ate bad *Sauerkraut*." The chef wiped perspiration from his red face and neck.

"My sister wasn't able to finish housekeeping school."

"Is she ill?"

"She's fine, now that she's home with our mother."

"Ah. Is she a good worker? She could come here and live in this room with you. We could use another dishwasher."

"You'd frighten her to death." Brennholtz could shout louder than Papa. Even his laughter boomed enough to rattle crockery. Elise would probably break half the dishes before the end of her first week.

"A pity Derry doesn't need another maid."

"He would if he rented rooms to the English."

Warner wiped the towel over his thinning blond hair. "He did a few years ago, but the English and Germans are like oil and water, and Derry doesn't speak enough English to sort things out. When he couldn't bring peace, customers didn't want to pay. So now he caters to Swiss and Germans."

"And makes less money."

"And has fewer headaches." Warner slapped the towel over his shoulder. "Money isn't everything."

"People who have it always say that."

He laughed. "You'd know how to stop a ruckus, *ja*? Bang two heads together. Derry should train you to manage and take a long vacation."

She knew he meant it as a joke, but she pushed herself up and faced him. "If I could speak French and English, I'd figure out a way to fill every room in this hotel."

He laughed. "Then learn, Fräulein."

"In a basement kitchen?" She put her hands on her hips. "Do you speak French?"

*"Nein."*

"English?"

"Not a word."

"Then I should quit and go to Geneva or London." She brushed past him.

"I don't like your joke!" He followed her.

"Do you think I plan to remain an assistant cook for the rest of my life?"

Warner snatched a pot off a hook and slammed it on the worktable. Everyone jumped except Marta. "This is the thanks I get for training you!"

How many times did she have to say it? Marta bared her teeth in a smile and dipped in an exaggerated curtsy. "*Vielen Dank*, Herr

Brennholtz." She spoke with cloying sweetness. *"Danke. Danke. Danke."*

He laughed. "That's better."

Her anger evaporated. Why take out her frustrations on Warner when he had been nothing but kind? "I told you I wouldn't stay here forever."

"*Ja.* I know. You have big dreams! Too big, if you ask me."

"I didn't."

His hands worked quickly, coating pieces of meat in flour and seasonings. "It takes years to become a chef."

She tossed flour on her work area and grabbed a hunk of dough from a bowl. "I don't have to become a chef, Herr Brennholtz, just a good cook."

"Ha! Then you're not as ambitious as I thought!"

She felt a fierce rush inside her. "I'm more ambitious than you'll ever know."

* * *

Mama wrote again. Papa had found a position for Elise in Thun.

*The family is wealthy. They come from Zurich and spend the summer. Elise has room and board, and she can come home on her day off.*

*When will we see you? You haven't been home since Elise returned from Bern. Papa told her you're probably upset over the wasted money.*

Marta wrote back right away.

*Mama, please tell Elise not to be distressed. I work fourteen hours a day, six days a week, and spend Sunday mornings in church. When summer ends, the Germania will have fewer patrons. I'll come home then. In the meantime, give our little barn swallow my love.*

Mama's next letter gave Marta some hope that Elise would do better.

*Elise seems well settled. She hasn't been home for two weeks. Herr Meyer told a friend what a lovely child she is. Their son Derrick changed his plans to return to Zurich. . . .*

Marta wondered if Derrick might be the reason Elise didn't feel the need to come home.

Rosie wrote, too, filling two pages about Arik Brechtwald dancing with her at a summer festival, and wouldn't her father lock her up if he knew she'd received her first kiss! She filled another page with news of her sisters and brothers and mother and father, and town gossip.

Marta wrote back and asked Rosie if her father knew any hotel managers in Geneva.

*Warner speaks High German, but not a word of French. . . .*

Rosie responded quickly.

*Father has only acquaintances in Geneva; unfortunately, no one upon whom he could prevail for a favor. Mama has an older second cousin in Montreux. Luisa von Olman is a widow with six children, only two left at home. Her eldest son is the commander of a fortress, but I've forgotten where. Mama says he married a lovely little Swiss-Italian girl and they have ten children, but since it was too far for the children to go to a valley school, the government built one right there on the mountain where they live. Mama will write Cousin Luisa. . . .*

Marta wrote to Frau Gilgan to thank her, and then to Rosie.

*I plan to come home for a week the middle of September, then go to Montreux. If Cousin Luisa cannot help, I will haunt the hotels along the lakeshore. I'll find something. I would like to speak some French before my eighteenth birthday! Something more than bonjour and merci beaucoup!*

Toward the end of summer, Marta received a letter from Elise. Surprised and pleased, Marta tore it open immediately rather than wait for a quiet moment alone.

*Dearest Marta,*

*Please help me. I'm afraid of Herr Meyer. He won't leave me alone. Papa will be angry if I come home without any money, but I haven't been paid anything at all and I'm terrified of Frau Meyer. She hates me because of her horrible son. I thanked God when he left for Zurich. I would ask Mama to come, but she is not well enough. Please. I'm begging you. Come and help me get away from here.*

*Your loving little sister,*

*Elise*

"What's wrong?" Warner was slicing veal. "You look ill."

"My sister needs me." She shoved the letter into her skirt pocket. "I have to go."

*"Now?"*

She raced into her small bedroom and threw a few things into her shoulder bag. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Go tomorrow." Warner blocked her way. "I need you here."

"Elise needs me more, and you have Della and Arlene."

"I could dismiss you!"

"Go ahead! That would give me the excuse I need to go to

Montreux! Now, get out of my way!"

He caught her by the shoulders when she tried to push past him. "It won't be the last time your sister needs you. When your mother is gone, you'll be the one she leans on. . . ."

"I have to go."

With a sigh, Warner released her.

Marta raced up the stairs and out of the hotel, boarding a hired coach to Thun.

After asking directions, she found her way to the huge chalet at the end of a street on the edge of town. A man trimming roses in the front garden straightened as she approached. "Can I help you, Fräulein?"

"I've come to see my sister, Elise Schneider."

"Go around back to the kitchen. Frau Hoffman will help you."

An old woman with a crown of white braids answered the door. Marta quickly introduced herself and stated her business. The woman looked relieved. "Come in, Fräulein. I'll fetch Elise for you."

The kitchen smelled of baking bread. Apples, nuts, raisins, and oats had been set out on the worktable. The floors looked freshly washed, the copper pots polished, the counter surfaces clean. Marta paced, agitated.

Elisa flew through the kitchen door. "Marta!" She threw herself into Marta's startled embrace and burst into tears. "You came. I was so afraid you wouldn't. . . ."

Marta could feel how thin she was. "Don't they feed you?"

"She's been too upset to eat." The cook closed the door behind her and went to the worktable.

Marta saw a purple bruise on her sister's cheek. Heat surged through her body. "Who struck you?"

Elise gulped sobs, leaving Frau Hoffman to answer grimly. "Frau Meyer." The cook picked up another apple and sliced through it cleanly. "And she's not the only one in this family who's done harm to your poor sister."

Marta's body went cold. She pressed Elise away, holding her by the arms. "Tell me what's been going on, Elise." She spoke gently, but her sister cried harder, her mouth opening and closing like a dying fish. She seemed incapable of uttering even a single distinguishable word.

Frau Hoffman cut an apple into four pieces and began removing the core from each section with quick gouges. "A father has no

business putting a pretty young girl like Elise in this house. Not with the young man and his father. I could've told him!"

Marta stared at her, stomach turning over.

Frau Hoffman sliced apple into the bowl. "I risk losing my job if I say more." She gave Elise a pitying glance before returning to her work. "But you should get her out of this house now if you don't want more harm to come to her."

Marta tipped Elise's chin. "We'll go as soon as we collect your things and what salary is owed you."

"Well, good luck trying, Fräulein." Frau Hoffman snorted. "The mistress hasn't paid anyone since the beginning of summer. She never does until the last day, and seldom the full amount."

Tears streamed down Elise's white cheeks, making the purple bruise stand out even more. "Can't we go now, Marta?" Her body trembled violently. "Please."

Frau Hoffman tossed the paring knife into the bowl and grabbed a towel. "I'll get your sister's things. You two wait here."

Marta tried to calm Elise. "Tell me what happened, *Liebling*."

"I want to die." Elise covered her face, shoulders shaking. When she swayed, Marta made her sit. Sobbing, Elise pulled her apron up over her head and rocked back and forth. Marta held her tightly, her cheek against the top of her sister's head. Anger grew inside her until she didn't know who shook more. "We'll leave soon, Elise. Here's Frau Hoffman now."

"I got everything."

*Everything but Elise's wages.* "Where's Frau Meyer?"

"In the parlor, but she won't speak to you."

"You sit right here." She stood.

"Where are you going?" Elise grabbed Marta's skirt. "Don't leave me!"

She cupped Elise's face. "Stay here in the kitchen with Frau Hoffman. I'll be back in a few minutes and we'll go home. Now, let go so I can get your wages."

"I wouldn't go, Fräulein."

"They're not getting away with it!" Marta banged the kitchen door open, strode through the dining room and across the hall. As she entered the parlor, she saw a heavyset woman in a green day dress half-reclined on a settee near the windows overlooking the garden. Startled, the woman dropped her delicate china cup, shattering it on the saucer. Tea splashed down the front of her. Gasping, she rose and

brushed frantically at the stain. “I don’t know you! What are you doing in my house?”

“I’m Elise’s older sister, Marta.” She didn’t stop in the door. “And I’ve come to collect her wages.”

“Eginhardt!” Frau Meyer cried out angrily. “I’ll have you thrown out! How dare you come in here demanding anything!” When Marta kept coming, the woman’s pale blue eyes widened, and she moved quickly behind a wide table strewn with books. *“Eginhardt!”* she screamed shrilly, then glared at Marta. “I’ll have you arrested.”

“Call the constable! I’d like to tell him how you cheat your staff! I wonder how many shop owners are waiting to be paid?”

Paling, Frau Meyer pointed. “Stand over there by the door and I’ll get her wages!”

“I’ll stand right here!”

Frau Meyer stepped cautiously around the table and hurried to a desk on the other side of the room. Fuming as she sorted through keys she had taken from her pocket, she finally managed to find the one to unlock the desk drawer. She removed some francs and locked the drawer before holding them out. “Take them!” She tossed the coins on the desk. “Take them and get that worthless girl out of my house!”

Marta gathered the coins and counted them. Raising her head, she glared. “Elise has been here three months. This barely covers two.”

Frau Meyer’s face turned red. She unlocked the drawer, yanked it open, and removed more francs, locking the drawer again. “Here’s the money! Now, get out!” She tossed the coins in Marta’s direction.

Pride made Marta want to storm out without the money, but fury over the abuse Elise had suffered kept her in the room, collecting each coin, and counting them. Frau Meyer shouted for Eginhardt again. Marta straightened and sneered. “Perhaps your Eginhardt doesn’t come because you haven’t paid him either.”

Stiffening, Frau Meyer lifted her chin, eyes flashing. “Your sister is a worthless slut.”

Marta dropped the coins into the pocket of her skirt and came around the desk. “One more thing I need before we leave, Frau Meyer.” Marta slapped the woman hard across the face. “That’s for the mark you left on my sister.” Gasping, Frau Meyer backed into the drapes. Marta slapped her across the other cheek. “And that’s for insulting her.” When she raised her fist, Frau Meyer shrank from her. “One more word against my sister, and I’ll let every father in Thun

and Steffisburg know what your son and husband have done to my sister. What I just did to you is nothing compared to what will happen to them!"

* * *

Marta still shook with rage as she walked alongside Elise, holding her hand as she carried both their bundles. She didn't need to ask any more questions. Elise walked with her head down, her hand clammy with sweat. Marta thanked God her sister had at least managed to stop crying. "Smile and say hello, Elise."

"I can't."

When they came in sight of the house, Elise let go of Marta's hand and ran as though pursued by demons. By the time Marta entered the house, Mama had Elise in her arms and Papa had come in from the workroom in back. He stood in the middle of the room, glowering at Marta. "What's going on here? Why did you bring her home?"

"Because she wrote and begged me to come and get her."

"It was none of your business!"

"You always blame me! But you're right this time, Papa! This is *your* business! You put her there in that house with those wretched people!"

"Come, *Engel.*" Mama put her arms around Elise and helped her up. "We'll go upstairs."

"She can't quit a job without notice, Anna!" Papa shouted after them. "She has to go back!"

Marta came all the way inside the house, threw the bundles down, and closed the door firmly behind her. "You are not sending her back, Papa."

He turned on her. "Who are you to say whether she comes or goes? I'm her father! She'll do what I tell her!"

"She's not going back!"

"It's time she grew up!"

"That may be so, Papa, but next time, check her employers' references! Make sure they pay their servants! They didn't give her a single franc! Worse, they ravished her."

"Ravished her!" he sneered. Waving his hand, he dismissed the accusation. "Elise cries over spilt milk."

Marta hated him in that moment. "Did you see the bruise on her cheek?" She came farther into the room, hands balling into fists. "Frau Meyer called *your daughter* a slut because Herr Meyer can't keep his

hands off Elise! And the son did worse before going back to Zurich!"

"Nonsense! It's all nonsense! You ruined everything by taking Elise out of that house!"

"I have ruined nothing. You have helped them ruin *her*!"

"Herr Meyer told me Elise is exactly the kind of girl he wants for his son."

Could her father be such a fool? "And you thought he meant marriage?" Marta cried out in fury. "A tailor's daughter and an aristocrat's son?"

"Her beauty is worth something."

Sickened, Marta swept by him and headed for the stairs.

"Don't you turn your back on me!" Papa raged.

"God forgive you, Papa!" She flew upstairs. A moment later, she heard a door slam below. Mama sat on the bed Marta had shared with Elise. Her sister lay with her head in their mother's lap. Mama stroked her like she would a pet dog. "You're home now, my darling. Everything will be all right."

Marta came into the room and closed the door quietly behind her. "No, it won't, Mama. It'll never be right."

"Hush, Marta!"

*Hush?* Marta took the coins from her pocket. "This money belongs to Elise."

Elise rose up, eyes wild. "I don't want the money! I don't want anything *he* touched."

Mama looked shocked and frightened. "Who is she talking about?"

"Herr Meyer. And he wasn't the only one." When Marta told her what the cook had said, Mama's face crumpled.

"Oh, God . . ." Mama put her arms around Elise. "Oh, God, oh, God. I'm so sorry, *Engel*." She rocked Elise, sobbing into her hair. "Throw the money away, Marta. It's filthy lucre!"

"It's not mine to dispose of." Marta left the coins on the bed. "Let Elise do it." Maybe it would give her sister some small bit of satisfaction after what had been done to her. "At least, Papa won't profit from his mistake."

Mama raised her head. "Do it for her. She's too distressed."

"Oh, Mama!" Marta wept. "Papa is right about one thing. You've crippled her. She can't even defend herself!"

Mama looked stricken.

Unable to bear more, Marta turned away.

"Where are you going?" Mama spoke in a broken voice.

"Back to Interlaken. I have responsibilities."

"There are no coaches until morning."

"There will be less trouble if I go. I seem to bring out the worst in Papa." With her gone, he might think over what she had told him and regret the part he had played in this tragedy. "I'll ask the Gilgans if I can stay for a night."

"Perhaps you're right." Mama stroked Elise's head, buried in her lap. "I'm sorry, Marta."

"I'm sorry, too, Mama. More sorry than I can express."

Elise sat up. "Please don't leave, Marta. Stay here with me."

"You have Mama to take care of you, Elise. You don't need both of us."

Elise looked at Mama. "Tell her to stay!"

Mama cupped Elise's face. "You can't ask for more than she's done already, Elise. She brought you home, *Engel*. But she doesn't belong here anymore. God has other plans for your sister." Mama gathered Elise close and looked at Marta. "She has to go."

* * *

The Gilgans welcomed Marta and asked no questions. Perhaps they assumed she had fought with her father again. She couldn't tell them what had happened to Elise, though rumors would spread soon enough. She told Rosie when they went to bed, knowing Elise would have terrible days ahead.

"I can't bear to stay. I can't stand by and watch Papa sulk and grumble about his ruined plans or see Mama coddle her. But Elise will need a friend." She wept.

Rosie put an arm around her. "You needn't say more. I'll offer my friendship, Marta. I'll invite Elise to tea. I'll invite her for walks in the hills. If she wants to talk, I'll listen and never repeat a word. I swear on my life."

"I'll try not to be jealous."

Moonlight came in through the window, making Rosie's face white and angelic. "I'm doing it for you." Tears shone in her eyes. "I'll do my best. You know I will. But Elise has to want a friend."

"I know. What I don't know is what will happen to her now. It would've been better if Mama hadn't protected her so much." Marta rubbed tears away angrily. "If anyone tried to rape me, I'd scream and claw and kick!"

"Maybe she did."

Marta doubted it. “I swear before God, Rosie, if I’m ever fortunate enough to have a daughter, I’ll make sure she’s strong enough to stand up for herself!”

When Rosie fell asleep, Marta lay awake staring at the beamed ceiling. What would become of Elise? How long before the Meyers’ cook told someone what happened in that house? Rumors spread like mold on the damp wall of Marta’s *Germania* basement bedroom. What if Herr Meyer or his son Derrick bragged to friends about the beautiful little angel they had used over the summer? Papa would not likely have the courage to confront Herr Meyer!

If only her little sister could walk to market, head up in the knowledge that she was not to blame for any of it. But that would never happen. More likely, a word from Papa, and Elise would take the shame onto herself, absorbing it, plagued by it. And Mama, filled with pity, would allow her to hide inside the house. If Elise didn’t show her face, people might even begin to wonder if she had been culpable, which would only distress Elise even further. Her sister would hide away and help Mama sew fine seams and hems. As time passed, Elise would become more withdrawn, more frightened of the outside world, more dependent. Walls would give Elise the illusion of safety, just as Mama’s arms had seemed to. Papa might allow it to happen just to make things easy on himself. After all, two women working day and night and neither asking for nor expecting anything would be to his benefit!

Marta pressed fists against her eyes and prayed. *Lord, You say blessed are the meek. Please bless my sister. You say blessed are those who are gentle and pure in heart. Please bless Mama. Lord, You say blessed are the peacemakers. Please bless Rosie. I ask nothing for myself because I’m a sinner. You know me better than I know myself. You knit me in my mother’s womb. You know how I burn. My head pounds. My hands sweat for vengeance. Oh, God, had I strength and means, I would send Herr Meyer and his son to the depths of hell for what they did to my sister, and Papa right after them for letting it happen!*

Turning away from Rosie, Marta covered her head with the blanket and wept silently.

She got up early the next morning and thanked the Gilgans for their kind hospitality. Rosie walked with her down the hill. “Are you going to see your family before you leave?”

“No. And I’m not coming back.”

Her mother had already given her permission to fly.

## Hoofstuk 5

## 1904

Marta moet na die klein kamertjie langs die kombuis vlug om van die onaardse hitte van die stowe weg te kom. Sy sak op haar bed neer en klad haar natgeswete gesig met die vadoek wat oor haar skouer hang. Sy sug verlig toe sy teen die klipmuur terugsak. Aan die ander kant vloei die Aarerivier wat tussen die *Thunersee* en *Brienzersee* deurloop. Die konstante vogtigheid wat deur die pleister na binne sypel, veroorsaak 'n yslagie in die winter en laat paddastoele in die somer spruit.

"Marta!" roep die sjef, Warner Brennholtz, vanuit die kombuis. "*Marta!*"

"Gee my 'n oomblik of ek smelt vinniger as jou sjokolade!" Sy het die hele aand nog nie 'n ruskansie gehad nie, en Herr Weib het vir haar 'n brief van Mamma af gebring. Sy haal dit uit haar voorskootsak, skeur die koevert oop en begin lees.

*My liefste Marta*

*Ek hoop jy is gelukkig en dit gaan goed. Ek hou jou in my hart en bid elke dag vir jou. Ek het hartseer nuus. Pappa moes na Bern toe gaan en Elise by die huishoudkundeskool gaan haal. Gravin Saintonge het gesê sy is nie geskik vir diens nie.*

*Pappa het nie die eerste keer gegaan toe sy geskryf het nie. Hy het gedink Elise sou aanpas. Maar hy moes gaan toe die gravin hom laat weet dat hy Elise moes kom haal of iemand se reisgeld betaal om haar huis toe te vergesel.*

*Die graaf het geweier om 'n enkele frank terug te betaal. Hy sê sy het plek opgeneem wat aan 'n ander meisie gegee kon word, en hy sou nie die verlies aanvaar nie. Dit was sleg genoeg, maar hy het dit vererger deur vir Pappa te sê 'n pa behoort te weet of sy eie kind opgewasse is om van haar gesin geskei te word. Ek weet die Here het vir ons almal 'n les hierin.*

"Ag, Mamma!" Haar ma het Elise se afhanklikheid onwetend aangemoedig, maar die volle verantwoordelikheid kan nie by haar voete gelê word nie. Marta verkwalik haarself vir die feit dat sy Pappa die geld gegee het om Elise na Bern te stuur. Hy het haar so skuldig laat voel toe sy die eerste keer nee gesê het.

> *"As jy vir jou suster lief was … as jy nie so gierig en selfsugtig was nie … Jy dink niks van jou gesin nie … jy hou al jou geld terwyl jy kan help … "*

Sy moes vir Pappa gesê het dat hulle deur daardie twee bedrieërs in Bern vir die gek gehou is. In plaas daarvan het sy haarself oortuig dat dit Elise goed sou doen om weg te kom. Dalk sou sy tussen die ander meisies van haar ouderdom floreer en Bern net soveel soos Marta geniet. Marta het ekstra geld vir Elise gestuur en haar aangemoedig om na die *Marktgasse* toe te gaan en sjokolade en pasteitjies by die *Café Français* te gaan koop.

Nou kan sy net bid dat Pappa nie sy woede op Elise uithaal nie.

Marta tel die brief op en lees verder.

> *Moet asseblief nie vir haar kwaad wees nie. Ek weet dit was jou geld wat gemors is, maar Elise het regtig probeer. Sy het daarin geslaag om drie weke te bly voordat sy die eerste keer geskryf het. En sy kry swaar. Pappa het nog nie 'n woord met haar gepraat sedert hy haar huis toe gebring het nie.*
>
> *Elise help my soveel sy kan. Haar steke is nou net so mooi soos myne. Sy sal met ervaring leer om vinniger te werk. Sy help Frau Zimmer ook met klein Evrard. Hy is so dierbaar, maar hy is op 'n ouderdom waar hy die wêreld vol is. Hy het nou die dag vir 'n paar minute onder haar oë uit verdwyn. Sy hou hom nou fyner dop.*
>
> *Skryf gou, Liebling. Jou briewe beteken baie vir ons almal. Mag die Here jou seën en beskerm. Mag Hy sy aangesig oor jou laat skyn.*
>
> *Ek is lief vir jou.*
>
> *Mamma*

Nadat Marta die brief opgevou het, druk sy dit weer in haar voorskootsak. Sy sal skryf en Mamma aanmoedig om Elise mark toe te stuur. Sy moet leer om met mense te praat. Sy kan by die Beckers gaan brood koop en met Frau Fuchs oor meer heuning praat. Elise moet leer om op haar eie voete te staan. Sy gaan Mamma nie vir altyd hê nie.

Daar is die gerinkel van porselein in die ander vertrek. Warner Brennholtz bulder ongeduldige opdragte. Haar deur vlieg oop en die

sjef kom in. Sy het lank gelede geleer om nie verbaas of ontsteld te wees wanneer iemand by haar kamer inbars nie. Die hitte van die kombuis noodsaak ontvlugting, en haar klein slaapkamertjie is gerieflik. Die werkers trippel van ontbyt tot aandete rondom mekaar en daar is gereeld iemand wat vir ’n paar minute hier kom afkoel voordat hulle die stowe en oonde weer aandurf. Dis eers nadat die laaste gaste weg is en die laaste skottelgoed gewas en weggepak is dat Marta enige privaatheid het.

Brennholtz is langer as Pappa en ’n hele paar kilogram swaarder. Hy hou ook van sy bier, maar is vrolik wanneer hy te veel gedrink het, anders as haar pa wat buierig en aggressief raak wanneer hy dronk is. “Wat makeer jou? Dit lyk asof jy slegte *Sauerkraut* geëet het.” Die sjef vee die sweet van sy rooi gesig en nek af.

“My suster kon nie haar opleiding by die huishoudkundeskool voltooi nie.”

“Is sy siek?”

“Noudat sy weer by ons ma is, gaan dit goed.”

“Aa. Is sy ’n goeie werker? Sy kan hiernatoe kom en die kamer met jou deel. Ons kan nog ’n skottelgoedwasser gebruik.”

“Sy sal haar doodskrik vir jou.” Brennholtz kan harder as Pappa bulder. Selfs die breekgoed ratel wanneer hy lag. Elise sal die helfte van die skottelgoed waarskynlik voor die einde van haar eerste week breek.

“Dis jammer dat Derry nie nog ’n bediende nodig het nie.”

“Hy sou as hy van die kamers aan die Engelse uitgehuur het.”

Warner vee met die vadoek oor sy yl blonde hare. “Hy het ’n paar jaar gelede, maar die Engelse en Duitsers is soos olie en water, en Derry se Engels is nie goed genoeg om dinge uit te sorteer nie. En omdat hy nie die vrede kon bewaar nie, wou die gaste nie betaal nie. Nou ontvang hy net die Switsers en Duitsers.”

“En maak minder geld.”

“En het minder kopsere.” Warner gooi die vadoek oor sy skouer. “Geld is nie alles nie.”

“Mense wat dit het, sê altyd so.”

Hy lag. “Weet jy hoe om ’n bakleiery te beëindig, *ja*? Stamp twee koppe teen mekaar. Derry behoort jou te leer om die plek te bestuur en op ’n lang vakansie te gaan.”

Sy weet hy bedoel dit as ’n grap, maar sy staan op en kyk hom in die oë. “As ek Frans en Engels kon praat, sou ek ’n manier kry om elke kamer in hierdie hotel te verhuur.”

Hy lag. "Dan moet jy leer, Fräulein."

"In 'n kombuis in die kelder?" Sy plant haar hande op haar heupe. "Kan jy Frans praat?"

"*Nein.*"

"Engels?"

"Nie 'n woord nie."

"Dan moet ek bedank en Genève of Londen toe gaan." Sy skuur by hom verby.

"Jou grappies is nie snaaks nie!" Hy volg haar.

"Dink jy ek is van plan om vir die res van my lewe 'n assistentkok te wees?"

Warner haal 'n pot van 'n haak af en plak dit op die werktafel neer. Almal wip, behalwe Marta. "Is dit die dank wat ek kry nadat ek jou opgelei het?"

Hoeveel keer moet sy dit sê? Marta glimlag en maak 'n oordrewe kniebuiging. "*Vielen dank*, Herr Brennholtz." Sy praat in 'n stroperige stem. "*Danke. Danke. Danke.*"

Hy lag. "Dis beter."

Haar woede smelt weg. Hoekom haar frustrasie op Warner uithaal wat nog net goed was vir haar? "Ek het jou gesê ek gaan nie vir altyd bly nie."

"Ja. Ek weet. Jy het groot drome. Te groot, as jy my vra."

"Gelukkig het ek nie gevra nie."

Sy hande werk vinnig terwyl hy vleisstukke met meel en kruie bestuif. "Dit neem jare om 'n sjef te word."

Sy gooi meel op haar werkarea en haal 'n homp deeg uit 'n bak. "Ek hoef nie 'n sjef te word nie, Herr Brennholtz, net 'n goeie kok."

"Ha! Dan is jy nie so ambisieus as wat ek gedink het nie!"

Iets bruis driftig in haar op. "Ek is meer ambisieus as wat jy ooit sal weet."

***

Mamma skryf weer. Pappa het in Thun vir Elise werk gekry.

> *Dit is 'n welgestelde familie. Hulle kom van Zürich af en bly vir die somer. Elise bly in en sy kan huis toe kom wanneer sy 'n dag vry het.*
>
> *Wanneer sien ons jou weer? Jy was nog nie weer by die huis sedert Elise van Bern af teruggekom het nie. Pappa het vir haar gesê dat jy waarskynlik omgekrap is oor die vermorste geld.*

Marta skryf dadelik terug.

*Mamma, sê asseblief vir Elise sy moenie bekommerd wees nie. Ek werk 14 ure 'n dag, ses dae 'n week en gaan Sondagoggende kerk toe. Aan die einde van die somer gaan daar minder gaste in die Germania wees. Dan sal ek huis toe kom. Intussen moet Mamma vir ons klein swaeltjie liefde stuur.*

Mamma se volgende brief gee Marta hoop dat Elise beter vaar.

*Dit lyk asof Elise mooi aangepas het. Sy was twee weke laas by die huis. Herr Meyer het vir 'n vriend vertel hoe 'n lieflike kind sy is. Hulle seun Derrick het besluit om nie so gou weer na Zürich toe terug te keer nie ...*

Marta wonder of Derrick dalk die rede is waarom Elise nie die behoefte het om huis toe te kom nie.

Rosie skryf ook, onder andere twee bladsye oor die somerfees waar Arik Brechtwald met haar gedans het. "*Sal my pa my nie afslag as hy weet dat ek vir die eerste keer gesoen is nie!*" Sy vul nog 'n bladsy met nuus oor haar susters en broers en ma en pa en die nuutste skindernuus.

Marta skryf terug en vra vir Rosie of haar pa enige hotelbestuurders in Genève ken.

*Warner praat Hoogduits, maar nie 'n woord Frans nie ...*

Rosie skryf vinnig terug.

*Pa het net 'n paar kennisse in Genève; ongelukkig niemand by wie hy 'n guns kan vra nie. Mamma het 'n ouer niggie in Montreux. Luisa von Olman is 'n weduwee met ses kinders. Nog net twee is by haar in die huis. Haar oudste seun is die bevelvoerder van 'n fort, maar ek het vergeet waar. Mamma sê hy het met 'n dierbare klein Switsers-Italiaanse meisie getrou en hulle het tien kinders, maar aangesien dit te ver vir die kinders was om in die vallei skool te gaan, het die regering een op die berg gebou waar hulle bly. Mamma sal vir niggie Luisa skryf ...*

Marta skryf 'n dankiesêbrief aan Frau Gilgan, en dan aan Rosie.

*Ek is van plan om vir 'n week in September huis toe te kom en dan na Montreux toe te gaan. As niggie Luisa nie kan help nie, sal ek by die hotelle langs die meer gaan vra. Ek sal iets kry. Ek wil voor my agtiende verjaarsdag 'n bietjie kan Frans praat! Iets meer as bonjour en merci beaucoup!*

Aan die einde van die somer kry Marta ’n brief van Elise. Marta is so verras en bly dat sy dit sommer dadelik oopskeur en nie vir ’n stil oomblik wag nie.

*Liefste Marta*

*Help my, asseblief. Ek is bang vir Herr Meyer. Hy wil my nie uitlos nie. Pappa gaan kwaad wees as ek sonder geld huis toe gaan, maar ek is nog nie ’n frank betaal nie en ek is doodbang vir Frau Meyer. Sy haat my oor haar aaklige seun. Ek het die Here gedank toe hy weer Zürich toe is. Ek sou Mamma gevra het om te kom, maar sy is nie gesond genoeg nie. Asseblief. Ek smeek jou. Kom help my om hier weg te kom.*

*Jou liefdevolle kleinsus*

*Elise*

“Wat is fout?” Wagner is besig om vleis te kerf. “Jy lyk siek.”

“My sussie het my nodig.” Sy druk die brief in haar roksak. “Ek moet gaan.”

“Nóú?”

Sy storm na haar klein kamertjie toe en gooi ’n paar goed in haar rugsak. “Ek kom terug sodra ek kan.”

“Gaan môre.” Warner kom staan in haar pad. “Ek het jou hier nodig.”

“Elise het my nodiger, en jy het vir Della en Arlene.”

“Ek kan jou afdank!”

“Nou toe! Dit sal my die ideale verskoning gee om Montreux toe te gaan! Laat my toe om te gaan!”

Hy keer haar aan die skouers toe sy verby hom probeer druk. “Dit gaan nie die laaste keer wees wat jou suster jou nodig het nie. Wanneer jou ma nie meer daar is nie, gaan jy die een wees waarop sy steun ... ”

“Ek moet gaan.”

Warner sug en laat haar gaan.

Marta hardloop boontoe, haas haar uit die hotel en neem ’n huurkoets na Thun.

Nadat sy aanwysings gevra het, kry sy die groot huis aan die einde van ’n straat op die rand van die dorp. ’n Man wat in die voortuin besig is om rose te snoei, staan regop toe sy nader kom. “Kan ek jou help, Fräulein?”

“Ek is hier om my suster, Elise Schneider, te sien.”

“Gaan vra agter by die kombuis. Frau Hoffman sal jou help.”

’n Ou dame met ’n kroon van wit vlegsels maak die deur oop. Nadat

Marta haarself vinnig voorgestel het, verduidelik sy hoekom sy gekom het. Die vrou lyk verlig. "Kom in, Fräulein. Ek sal Elise vir jou gaan haal."

Die kombuis ruik na vars brood. Appels, neute, rosyntjies en semels is op die tafel uitgepak. Die vloere is blinkgewas, die koperpotte gepoleer en die werkoppervlakke skoon. Marta loop gespanne op en af.

Elise vlieg by die kombuisdeur in. "Marta!" Sy werp haar in Marta se verskrikte omhelsing en bars uit in trane. "Jy het gekom. Ek was so bang jy sou nie … "

Marta voel hoe maer sy is. "Kry jy nie kos nie?"

"Sy was te ontsteld om te eet." Die kok maak die deur agter haar toe en gaan staan by die werktafel.

Marta sien 'n pers kneusplek op haar suster se gesig. Sy word vuurwarm. "Wie het jou geslaan?"

Elise snik só dat Frau Hoffman stroef antwoord. "Frau Meyer." Die kok neem nog 'n appel en kerf dit sekuur middeldeur. "En sy is nie die enigste een in hierdie familie wat jou arme suster leed aangedoen het nie."

Marta voel hoe sy yskoud word. Sy hou Elise 'n entjie van haar weg om haar aan die arms vas te hou. "Sê vir my wat hier gebeur het, Elise." Sy praat sag, maar haar suster huil harder en haar mond gaan oop en toe soos 'n vis op droë grond. Sy kan nie 'n enkele verstaanbare woord uitkry nie.

Frau Hoffman sny 'n appel in vier stukkie en begin om die stronk uit elke gedeelte te haal. "Jou pa was onnosel om 'n mooi jong meisie soos Elise na hierdie huis te stuur. Nie met hierdie jong man en sy pa nie. Ek kon hom dit gesê het!"

Marta se maag draai terwyl sy die vrou aanstaar.

Frau Hoffman sny die appels in 'n bak in. "Ek kan my werk verloor as ek meer sê." Sy gee Elise 'n jammerhartige kyk voordat sy haar werk hervat. "Maar jy moet haar nou hier wegneem as jy nie wil hê sy moet verder seergemaak word nie."

Marta raak aan Elise se ken. "Ons loop sodra ons jou goed gekry het en hulle jou betaal het wat jou toekom."

"Sterkte daarmee, Fräulein." Frau Hoffman snork. "Die mevrou het nog niemand sedert die begin van die somer betaal nie. Sy doen dit altyd eers op die laaste dag, en dan selde die volle bedrag."

Die trane wat oor Elise se bleek wange stroom, laat die pers kol net nog meer uitstaan. "Kom ons loop net, Marta." Haar hele lyf bewe.

"Asseblief."

Frau Hoffman gooi die kerfmes in die bak en vee haar hande aan 'n vadoek af. "Ek sal jou suster se goed gaan haal. Wag julle twee hier."

Marta probeer om Elise te kalmeer. "Sê my tog wat gebeur het, *Liebling*."

"Ek wil doodgaan." Elise druk haar gesig in haar hande en haar skouers ruk. Toe haar knieë wil knak, laat Marta haar sit. Elise trek haar voorskoot oor haar kop en wieg heen en weer. Marta hou haar styf vas, haar wang teen haar sussie se kop. Haar woede neem so toe dat sy nie weet wie die meeste bewe nie. "Ons gaan nou-nou loop, Elise. Hier is Frau Hoffman nou."

"Ek het alles gebring."

*Alles behalwe Elise se betaling*. "Waar is Frau Meyer?"

"In die sitkamer, maar sy wil nie met jou praat nie."

"Bly julle net hier." Sy staan op.

"Wat doen jy?" Elise gryp Marta aan die romp. "Moet my nie los nie!"

Sy vou haar hande om Elise se gesig. "Bly hier in die kombuis by Frau Hoffman. Ek gaan oor 'n paar minute terug wees en dan gaan ons huis toe. Los nou my rok, dat ek jou geld gaan kry."

"Ek sou nie gaan as ek jy was nie, Fräulein."

"Hulle gaan nie hiermee wegkom nie!" Marta stoot die kombuisdeur oop, loop deur die eetkamer en af in die gang. Toe sy die sitkamer binnegaan, sien sy 'n oorgewig vrou in 'n groen drarok op 'n bankie voor die venster wat oor die tuin uitkyk. Die vrou los haar delikate porseleinkoppie verskrik en dit val stukkend op die piering. Haar tee mors oor die voorkant van haar rok. Sy staan snakkend op en vryf vervaard oor die vlek. "Ek ken jou nie! Wat maak jy in my huis?"

"Ek is Elise se ouer suster, Marta." Sy wag nie by die deur nie. "En ek het haar geld kom haal."

"Eginhardt!" gil Frau Meyer ontstoke. "Ek sal jou uitgooi! Hoe durf jy hier inkom en op enigiets aandring!" Toe Marta op haar afloop, rek die vrou se ligblou oë en sy beweeg vinnig agter 'n groot tafel vol boeke in. "*Eginhardt!*" skree sy verskrik en gluur na Marta. "Ek sal jou laat arresteer."

"Laat kom die polisie! Ek sal hulle graag vertel hoe jy jou personeel bedrieg! En ek wonder hoeveel winkeliers wag om betaal te word?"

Frau Meyer verbleek en beduie na die deur. "Gaan staan daar by die deur, dan gaan haal ek haar geld!"

"Ek bly net hier staan!"

Frau Meyer loop versigtig om die tafel en skarrel na ’n lessenaar aan die oorkant van die vertrek. Sy soek vervaard deur sleutels wat sy uit haar sak gehaal het en uiteindelik kry sy die een wat die lessenaarlaai oopsluit. Sy haal ’n paar frank uit en sluit die laai voordat sy die geld uithou. “Vat dit!” Sy gooi die munte op die tafel neer. “Vat hulle en kry daardie nuttelose meisie uit my huis uit!”

Marta neem die munte en tel hulle. Sy kyk op en gluur na die vrou. “Elise was drie maande lank hier. Hierdie geld is nie eens genoeg vir twee nie.”

Frau Meyer word rooi in die gesig. Sy sluit die laai oop, ruk dit oop en nadat sy nog ’n paar frank uitgehaal het, sluit sy die laai. “Hier is die geld! Maak dat jy wegkom!” Sy gooi die munte in Marta se rigting.

Haar trots maak dat Marta sonder die geld wil uitstorm, maar woede oor die mishandeling wat Elise verduur het, hou haar in die vertrek. Frau Meyer roep weer na Eginhardt. Marta kom orent en spot. “Dalk wil jou Eginhardt nie kom nie omdat jy hom ook nie betaal nie.”

Frau Meyer verstyf en lig haar ken. Haar oë blits. “Jou suster is ’n nuttelose slet.”

Marta laat val die munte in haar roksak en loop om die lessenaar. “Nog net een iets voordat ons gaan, Frau Meyer.” Marta klap die vrou hard deur die gesig. “Dis vir die merk wat jy op my sussie gelos het.” Frau Meyer snak na haar asem en retireer tot in die gordyne. Marta klap haar op die ander wang. “En dis vir die manier waarop jy haar beledig het.” Toe sy haar vuis lig, krimp Frau Meyer ineen. “Nog een woord teen my suster, en ek sal elke pa in Thun en Steffisburg vertel wat jou seun en man aan my suster gedoen het. Wat ek so pas aan jou gedoen het, is niks in vergelyking met wat met hulle sal gebeur nie!”

***

Marta bewe nog steeds van woede waar sy langs Elise loop. Sy hou haar hand vas en dra albei hulle sakke. Sy hoef nie nog vrae te vra nie. Elise loop kop onderstebo, haar hande klam van die sweet. Marta dank die Here dat haar suster ten minste ophou huil het. “Glimlag en sê hallo, Elise.”

“Ek kan nie.”

Toe die huis sigbaar word, los Elise Marta se hand en hardloop asof die duiwel self op haar hakke is. Teen die tyd dat Marta die deur

bereik, het Mamma Elise in haar arms en het Pappa uit die agterste werkkamer ingekom. Hy staan in die middel van die vertrek en gluur na Marta. "Wat is hier aan die gang? Hoekom het jy haar huis toe gebring?"

"Want sy het geskryf en my gesmeek om haar te gaan haal."

"Dit het niks met jou uit te waai nie!"

"Pappa het my nog altyd blameer! Maar hierdie keer is Pappa reg! Dit is Pá se besigheid! Dis Pappa wat haar na daardie huis met daardie vervloekte mense gestuur het!"

"Kom, my skat." Mamma sit haar arms om Elise en help haar op. "Ons gaan boontoe."

"Sy kan nie ophou werk sonder om kennis te gee nie, Anna!" gil Pappa agter hulle aan. "Sy moet teruggaan!"

Marta kom heeltemal in, gooi die sakke neer en maak die deur beslis agter haar toe. "Pappa gaan haar nie terugstuur nie."

Hy swaai om na haar. "Wie is jy om te sê of sy kom of gaan? Ek is haar pa! Sy sal maak soos ek sê!"

"Sy gaan nie terug soontoe nie!"

"Dis tyd dat sy grootword!"

"Pa is dalk reg, maar Pa beter volgende keer na haar werkgewers se verwysings kyk! Maak seker hulle betaal hulle bediendes! Hulle het haar nie 'n enkele frank gegee nie! Erger nog, hulle het haar onteer."

"Haar onteer!" smaal hy en maak 'n gebaar om die beskuldiging af te maak. "Elise maak alles erger as wat dit is."

Marta haat hom op hierdie oomblik. "Het Pa die merk op haar wang gesien?" Sy kom nader, haar hande in vuiste gebal. "Frau Meyer het *Pa se dogter* 'n slet genoem omdat Herr Meyer nie sy hande van Elise kon afhou nie! En die seun het erger dinge aan haar gedoen voordat hy Zürich toe is!"

"Twak! Dis alles twak! Jy het alles geruïneer deur Elise by daardie huis te gaan haal!"

"Ek het niks geruïneer nie. Pa het hulle gehelp om háár te ruïneer!"

"Herr Meyer het vir my gesê dat Elise presies die soort meisie is wat hy vir sy seun wil hê."

Hoe kan haar pa so dwaas wees? "En Pa het gedink hy praat van 'n huwelik?" Marta gee 'n woedende kreet. "'n Kleremaker se dogter en 'n aristokraat se seun?"

"Haar skoonheid moet iets werd wees."

Marta voel siek toe sy verby hom na die trappe toe storm.

"Moenie jou rug op my draai nie!" bulder haar pa.

“Mag die Here Pappa vergewe!” Sy vlieg boontoe. ’n Oomblik later hoor sy ’n deur onder klap. Mamma sit op die bed wat Marta met Elise gedeel het. Haar suster lê met haar kop in hulle ma se skoot. Mamma streel oor haar soos oor ’n troetelhondjie. “Jy is nou by die huis, my liefste. Alles gaan regkom.”

Marta kom die kamer binne en maak die deur saggies agter haar toe. “Nee, dit gaan nie, Mamma. Dit gaan nooit regkom nie.”

“Sagter, Marta!”

*Sagter*? Marta haal die munte uit haar sak. “Hier is Elise se geld.”

Elise sit regop, haar oë wild. “Ek wil nie die geld hê nie! Ek wil niks hê waaraan hý geraak het nie.”

Mamma lyk geskok en verskrik. “Van wie praat sy?”

“Herr Meyer. En hy was nie die enigste een nie.” Toe Marta haar vertel wat die kok gesê het, vertrek Mamma se gesig.

“Ag, Here … ” Mamma slaan haar arms om Elise. “Ag, Here, ag, Here. Ek’s so jammer, my engel.” Sy wieg Elise terwyl sy in haar hare snik. “Gaan gooi die geld weg, Marta. Dis vervloekte geld!”

“Dis nie my plek om dit weg te gooi nie.” Marta los die geld op die bed. “Elise moet dit doen.” Dalk sal dit haar suster ’n stukkie bevrediging gee. “Ten minste sal Pappa nie uit sy fout geld maak nie.”

Mamma kyk op. “Doen dit vir haar. Sy is te ontsteld.”

“Ag, Mamma!” Marta huil. “Oor een ding is Pappa reg. Mamma het haar verlam. Sy kan haarself nie eens verdedig nie!”

Mamma lyk verslae.

Marta kan nie meer nie en draai weg.

“Waarheen gaan jy?” vra Mamma in ’n gebroke stem.

“Terug Interlaken toe. Ek moet teruggaan werk toe.”

“Daar is eers môre weer ’n koets.”

“Daar sal minder moeilikheid wees as ek gaan. Ek bring die slegste in Pappa na vore.” As sy weg is, sal hy dalk dink oor wat sy gesê het en sy aandeel in hierdie tragedie berou. “Ek sal die Gilgans vra of ek vanaand daar kan oorbly.”

“Dalk is jy reg.” Mamma streel oor Elise se kop op haar skoot. “Ek’s jammer, Marta.”

“Ek’s ook jammer, Mamma. Meer as wat ek kan sê.”

Elise sit regop. “Moet asseblief nie weggaan nie, Marta. Bly hier by my.”

“Mamma sal na jou kyk, Elise. Jy het nie ons al twee nodig nie.”

Elise kyk na Mamma. “Sê sy moet bly!”

Mamma kelk haar hande om Elise se gesig. “Jy kan nie vir meer vra

as wat sy alreeds gedoen het nie, Elise. Sy het jou huis toe gebring, my engel. Maar haar plek is nie meer hier nie. God het ander planne vir jou suster." Mamma hou Elise vas en kyk na Marta. "Sy moet gaan."

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Die Gilgans verwelkom Marta en vra nie vrae nie. Dalk aanvaar hulle dat sy weer met haar pa baklei het. Sy kan hulle nie vertel wat met Elise gebeur het nie, al weet sy dat die stories binnekort gaan begin versprei. Maar toe hulle bed toe gaan, vertel sy vir Rosie, bewus daarvan dat 'n aaklige tyd vir Elise voorlê.

"Ek kan dit nie verduur om te bly nie. Ek kan nie meer staan en toekyk hoe Pappa oor sy verydelde planne uitvaar of kyk hoe Mamma haar oppiep nie. Maar Elise gaan 'n vriendin nodig hê." Sy huil.

Rosie sit 'n arm om haar. "Jy hoef niks meer te sê nie. Ek sal vir haar 'n vriendin wees, Marta. Ek sal Elise vir tee nooi. Ek sal haar nooi om saam in die berge te gaan stap. As sy wil praat, sal ek luister en nooit 'n woord herhaal nie. Ek sweer op my lewe."

"Ek sal probeer om nie jaloers te wees nie."

In die maanlig wat deur die venster val, lyk Rosie se gesig wit en engelagtig. "Ek doen dit vir jou." Trane blink in haar oë. "Ek sal my bes doen. Jy weet ek sal. Maar Elise moet 'n vriendin wíl hê."

"Ek weet. Wat ek nie weet nie, is wat nou met haar gaan gebeur. Dit sou beter gewees het as Mamma haar nie so oorbeskerm het nie." Marta vee haar trane driftig af. "As enigiemand my probeer verkrag, sal ek skree en krap en skop!"

"Dalk het sy."

Marta twyfel. "Ek sweer voor die Here, Rosie, as ek ooit gelukkig genoeg is om 'n dogter te hê, sal ek seker maak dat sy sterk genoeg is om vir haarself op te staan!"

Toe Rosie aan die slaap raak, lê Marta en staar na die dakbalke. Wat gaan van Elise word? Hoe lank voordat die Meyers se kok iemand gaan vertel wat in daardie huis gebeur het? Sulke stories versprei soos die mos teen die klam muur van Marta se kamertjie in die kelder. Sê nou Herr Meyer of sy seun, Derrick, spog oor die pragtige klein engeltjie wat hulle gedurende die somer misbruik het? Pappa sal nie sommer die moed hê om Herr Meyer te konfronteer nie!

As haar sussie maar net na die mark toe kan loop en haar kop kan hoog hou in die wete dat dit nie haar skuld was nie. Maar dit sal nooit

gebeur nie. Net ’n woord van Pappa, en Elise sal die skande op haarself neem, dit absorbeer en daardeur geteister word. En Mamma, haar hart vol jammerte, sal haar toelaat om in die huis weg te kruip. As Elise nie haar gesig wys nie, sal die mense dalk selfs begin wonder of sy aandadig was. En dit sal Elise net verder ontstel. Haar suster sal wegkruip en Mamma help om mooi some en nate te maak. Mettertyd sal Elise haar al hoe meer onttrek. Sy sal al hoe banger vir die buitewêreld wees en al hoe afhankliker word. Die mure sal vir Elise die illusie van veiligheid skep, nes sy blykbaar in Mamma se arms vind. Pappa sal dit dalk nog toelaat ook, net om dinge vir homself makliker te maak. Twee vroue wat dag en nag werk sonder om enigiets te vra of te verwag, sal immers tot sy voordeel wees!

Marta druk haar vuiste teen haar oë en bid.

*Here, U sê salig is die afhanklikes. Seën asseblief my sussie. U sê salig is hulle wat sagmoedig is. Seën asseblief vir Mamma. U sê geseënd is die vredemakers. Seën asseblief vir Rosie. Ek vra niks vir myself nie, want ek is ’n sondaar. U ken my beter as wat ek myself ken. U het my in my moederskoot aanmekaargeweef. U weet hoe ek brand. My kop klop. My hande brand vir wraak. Ag, Here, as ek die krag en die middele gehad het, sou ek Herr Meyer en sy seun in die hel gewerp het vir dit wat hulle aan my sussie gedoen het. En Pappa omdat hy dit laat gebeur het!*

Marta draai weg van Rosie, trek die kombers oor haar kop en huil sonder om ’n geluid te maak.

Die volgende oggend staan sy vroeg op en bedank die Gilgans vir hulle gasvryheid. Rosie loop saam met haar teen die berg af. “Gaan jy jou mense sien voor jy ry?”

“Nee. En ek kom nie terug nie.”

Haar ma het haar alreeds toestemming gegee om haar vlerke te sprei.

## Chapter 6

Marta received a letter from Rosie ten days later.

*I saw your mother and father in church. Hermann came, too. Elise didn't. Most people think she went back to Thun. Of course, she hasn't. I asked your mother if I might come to call on Elise. She asked how much you had told me and I said everything. She seemed upset about that, but I reassured her. She said Elise isn't ready to see anyone. I'll try again next week. . . .*

Mama wrote a week later.

*Rosie said you told her and no one else. Rosie is a good girl who can keep a confidence. She is kind. Papa went to Thun. The Meyers had closed up the house and gone back to Zurich. A man asked if he had come to look at the house. The Meyers plan to sell.*

Marta sent a brief letter in reply.

*Perhaps now that the Meyers have fled, you will help Elise come out of exile. Rosie wants to be a friend to her, Mama. Please encourage Elise to allow it.*

Mama wrote back.

*Elise is doing better. She helps me in the shop. Papa agrees the best place for her is here with me. She cries so easily.*

Marta tried to put it all from her mind, but she couldn't. She dreamed about Elise at night. She dreamed of burning the Meyers' house down with them inside.

"Go out for a walk." Warner brushed her aside. "If you knead the dough any more, we'll have bricks instead of loaves!"

"I'm sorry."

"You haven't been yourself since you came back from Steffisburg. You helped your sister, *ja*? It's been a month. Are you ready to tell me what happened?"

"No." She made a decision in that split second. "I'm done here. I'm going to Montreux."

Warner's head jerked up. "Just because I won't let you knead dough?"

"The dough has nothing to do with anything."

"Then why?"

"I have to get away!" She burst into tears.

The only sound in the kitchen was the burbling soup. Everyone stared at her. "Get back to work!" Warner shouted. He pushed Marta into the cold room off the kitchen. "Are you leaving or running

away?”

She sat on the edge of the bed, head in hands. “What does it matter?” She wiped her face. She thought of Elise staying in the same place, remaining a child for the rest of her life. “I know what I want in life, and I’m going after it. I’m not going to let things happen to me. I’m going to make things happen!”

Warner sat beside her. “Why are you in such a hurry? You’re only sixteen. You have time.”

“You don’t understand, Warner.” Sometimes *she* didn’t understand. One day she wanted to run as far away and as fast as she could, and then the guilt would set in and she wondered if she shouldn’t go home, take care of Mama and Elise, and forget all about her dreams of making a better life for herself.

“You want to own a hotel, *ja*?” He snorted. “You think life will be good then. Work, work, and more work. That’s all you’ll ever do if you get what you want.”

“Work, work, and more work is what I have now.” If she went home, Papa would rule her life forever. “I’d rather work for myself than work to put money in someone else’s pocket!”

“Pigheaded girl.” When she tried to stand up, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her down again. “You still have much to learn from me about German cooking.”

“You’ve taught me enough, Warner.” She gave him a watery smile. “And I am grateful. But I’m going to Montreux.”

“What will your family have to say about that?”

“Nothing.” Hermann had followed his dream and joined the Army. Mama would always have Elise, and Elise would have Mama. Let Papa shoulder the responsibility for those God had given into his care.

“I see the pain in you, Marta.”

She wrenched free and went back into the kitchen to work.

Warner Brennholtz came to the train station as Marta left. She hadn’t expected to see him again. When she tried to thank him for coming to see her off, no words would come.

“You didn’t tell your family, did you?”

She shook her head.

Stepping close, Warner took her hand and pressed several heavy coins into her palm, closing her fingers around them.

“Marta, don’t cry. Enjoy this money; don’t hoard it.” He planted his hands firmly on her shoulders. “I’m going to speak to you like a

father. You're young. Have some fun when you get to Montreux. Go dancing! Laugh! Sing!" He kissed her on both cheeks and let her go.

Marta stepped up behind the last man boarding the train.

Warner called out to her before she went inside the passenger car. "When you have that hotel, write to me." He grinned broadly. "Maybe I'll come cook for you!"

* * *

Luisa von Olman invited Marta to stay until she could find work in one of the Montreux hotels or restaurants. Marta thought it would be easy. Montreux sat perched on the mountainside, Bernese-style houses, mansions, and grand hotels tucked like elaborate nests into winding cliff roads. Wealthy patrons strolled along cobbled pathways lined with linden trees and scented with lavender and lilacs, or sat on lawn chairs enjoying the view of cerulean Lake Geneva. Servants offered cake and melted chocolate for dipping.

Marta walked the steep streets for days. She found all the grand hotels and restaurants uninterested in a girl who could speak only German. Broadening her search to lesser neighborhoods, she spotted a Help Wanted sign in the window of Ludwig's Eatery. From the unkempt exterior, Marta could understand why.

The owner, Frau Gunnel, gave Marta a curt nod. "You'll have a week to prove yourself. Room and board and thirty francs a month." Marta held her tongue about the paltry pay. "Hedda!" Frau Gunnel called out. A pretty blonde setting beer steins on a tray glanced their way. Two other girls older than Marta worked with heads down, silent. "Show this new girl upstairs. Quickly! We have a lot to do before the dinner crowd arrives." Frau Gunnel looked at Marta again and shook her head. "I hope you're as good as all your fine papers claim." She held a bowl locked in one arm as she stirred fiercely with the other.

Hedda led Marta upstairs. Glancing back, she raised her brows. "I'm surprised you came here with all your qualifications, Fräulein."

She looked at the drab stairwell walls. "Unfortunately, I don't speak French or English."

"Neither do I." Hedda opened a door and stepped aside. "This is where we sleep. It's small, but comfortable. I hope you aren't afraid of mice. We have a nest of them somewhere in the wall. You can hear them scratching at night. Take that bed over there."

Marta saw a row of plank platforms with uninviting graying feather beds rolled at the end. The room was cold. The small, narrow

windows faced east, leaving the room dimly lit in the afternoon. No curtains to keep out the dawn. When Marta peered out, she could see only empty window boxes and the street below.

"I'm leaving soon," Hedda announced from the doorway. "I'm marrying Arnalt Falken. Have you heard of him?"

"I'm new to Montreux."

"His father is very rich. They live in a mansion up the road from here. Arnalt came one evening by himself and ordered beer and sausage. He says he took one look at me and fell in love."

Marta thought of Elise. Hedda had periwinkle eyes and long blonde hair, too. She hoped the girl had good sense.

Hedda nodded toward the window. "Frau Gunnel will expect you to plant flowers soon. She made me pay for them last year."

"Why should either one of us pay for them?"

She shrugged. "Frau Gunnel says we're the ones who get to enjoy them."

Marta dumped her knapsack on the bed. "If Frau Gunnel wants to dress up the outside of this place, she'll have to pay, or there'll be no flowers."

"I wouldn't argue with her, Fräulein, not if you want to keep your job. Flowers don't cost too much, and the patrons give good tips." She laughed. "Analt droppped a ten franc coin down my bodice the first time he came."

Marta turned away from the window. "No one is going to drop anything down my bodice."

"They will if you're friendly." The gleam in Hedda's eyes told Marta the girl valued money more than reputation.

* * *

By the end of the first week, Marta saw ways to improve the eatery. When she overheard Frau Gunnel complaining about poor business, Marta shared her thoughts.

"With a few changes, your business would improve."

Frau Gunnel turned. "Changes? What changes?"

"It wouldn't cost much if you repainted the front window boxes with bright colors and filled them with flowers that would attract the eye. The menus you have now are greasy. You could reprint them and put them in sturdy folders. Vary your menu occasionally."

Plump face reddening, Frau Gunnel put her hands on her ample hips. She looked Marta up and down in contempt. "You're sixteen and you think you know so much with your fancy certificate and

recommendations. You know nothing!" She jerked her head. "Go back to the kitchen!"

Marta went. She hadn't meant to insult the woman.

Frau Gunnel came in a few minutes later and went back to work on a hunk of beef, using a mallet as though attempting to kill a live animal. "I know why customers don't come. I have one pretty waitress who used to attract customers before she decided to marry one of them. And I have little Fräulein Marta as plain as bread and as friendly as *Sauerkraut*!"

No one in the kitchen looked up. Marta felt the heat rush into her face. "No one wants to eat in a dirty restaurant." Marta barely managed to dodge the flying mallet. Stripping off her apron, she tossed it like a shroud over the embattled beef and headed for the stairs. She threw her few things into a bag, marched downstairs and out onto the street. People up and down the block turned when Frau Gunnel stood in the doorway cursing her.

By the time the woman slammed the door, Marta's body felt so hot, she was sure steam came off her. She walked uphill rather than down. She pounded on one door after another, making inquiries. The first few opened the door, took one look out, and ducked back inside their houses, closing the door quickly in her face. Still fuming, Marta realized what a sight she must be and tried to calm down.

Now what? No job. No place to live. Her prospects were dimmer than when she had arrived in Montreux a month ago. She didn't want to go back to Luisa von Olman's and be a burden. She didn't want to go home and admit defeat. Bending over, she covered her face with her hands. "God, I know I'm impossible, but I work hard!" She fought back tears. "What do I do now?"

Someone spoke to her. "Mademoiselle?"

She burst into frustrated tears. "I came here to learn French!"

The man switched to German as easily as someone might strip off a glove and toss it aside. "Are you unwell, Fräulein?"

"No. I'm unemployed. I'm looking for work." She apologized and wiped her face. The man standing in front of her looked to be in his eighties. He wore an expensive suit and leaned heavily on a cane.

"I've been out walking. Do you mind if I sit, Fräulein?"

"No, of course not." She moved to give him room, wondering if he expected her to leave.

"I passed a house with a sign in the window in German, French, and Italian." He sank gratefully onto the bench. Lifting his cane, he

pointed. "If you go up that way three or four streets, I think you will find the house."

Thanking him, she began a search that took her the rest of the afternoon. Just as she was about to give up, she saw the sign in the window of a three-story house. No chipped paint here, and the eaves had been painted red. She heard muted laughter when she approached the front door. Brushing down her skirt and pushing the straggling damp tendrils of hair back from her face, she said a quick and desperate prayer before rapping the doorknocker. Clasping her hands in front of her, she forced a smile as she waited, hoping she looked presentable and not like some worn-down, bedraggled waif who had been walking up and down the mountain all afternoon.

Someone spoke French behind her. Marta jumped as a man reached past her and opened the door. "Excuse me?"

He spoke German this time. "Just go in. They won't hear you out here. They're already serving."

Marta entered behind him. "Would you please tell the proprietor I'm here to answer the sign in the window?"

He walked quickly down the hall and disappeared into another room.

Smells inside the house made Marta's stomach growl with hunger. She hadn't eaten since early morning, and then, only a small bowl of *Müsli*. Men's laughter swelled, startling her. She heard mumbled conversation and more laughter, less loud this time.

A young and attractive dark-haired woman came into the hallway. She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved blue dress covered with a white apron that accentuated her advanced pregnancy. Cheeks flushed, she dabbed her forehead with the back of her hand as she came toward Marta. "Mademoiselle?"

"Fräulein Marta Schneider, madame." She dipped in a curtsy. "I've come to apply for a position." She scrambled for her documents.

"I'm serving dinner now." She spoke fluent German, glancing back over her shoulder as someone called out.

"I can help you now, if you'll allow. I worked in the kitchen of *Hotel Germania* in Interlaken. We can talk about the position later."

"*Merci!* Just leave your things there by the door. We have a room full of hungry lions to feed."

The dining room had a long table, its straight-backed chairs filled with men on both sides, most young and professional by the look of their clothing. The room reverberated with loud talk, laughter, the

clink of wineglasses, and the call for bread being passed in a large basket. Pitchers of wine moved from hand to hand.

“Solange!” the handsome man at the head of the table called out. Solange went to him and put her arm around his shoulder, whispering in his ear. He looked at Marta and nodded.

Solange clapped her hands. The men around the table fell silent. She waved her hand toward Marta while speaking rapid French. The men gave Marta a cursory glance before returning to their conversations. Solange pointed to a large tureen at the end of the table; Marta hastened to it and tried to pick up the heavy bowl. “No, mademoiselle,” Solange protested quickly. “Too heavy. Let them pass their bowls to you.”

Marta filled each with thick, delicious-smelling stew, her stomach cramping with hunger. The tureen held just enough for each man to receive one full bowl. She followed Solange into the kitchen and set the empty bowl on the worktable. Solange sank onto a stool. “You did well, mademoiselle! Not a drop spilled.” Lifting her apron, she dabbed beads of sweat from her forehead. “God be praised you came when you did. Those men . . .” She laughed and shook her head. “They eat like horses.”

Marta’s stomach growled loudly. Solange raised her brows. Murmuring in French, she crossed the room, opened a cupboard, and took out a soup bowl. “Eat now. We have a few minutes before they start shouting for more.” She rubbed her back as she sat on the stool again.

“This is wonderful, Madame . . . ?”

“Fournier. Solange Fournier. My husband, Herve, was the one sitting at the head of the table.”

Marta quickly finished her stew, mopping up the last bit of juice with a piece of bread. Setting the bowl in the washbasin, she took the pitcher on the stove. “Shall I refill the tureen?”

Solange nodded. “I need someone to help me clean house, change the linens, do laundry, and work in the kitchen.”

Marta poured thick stew. “I need room, board, and sixty francs a month.” As soon as the words came out, Marta held her breath. Perhaps she had spoken too quickly and asked too much.

“You are a girl who knows her mind and is willing to work.” She planted her hands on her thighs and stood. “Done. How soon can you come?”

“All I need to do is move the knapsack I left in the foyer

upstairs."

*"Magnifique!"*

"Do all of those men live here, Madame Fournier?"

"Call me Solange, *s'il vous plaît*." She smiled brightly. "And I will call you Marta." She put more bread in a basket. "Only twelve live here. The others come for dinner when they are in town on business. A friend invites them the first time and they keep coming back. Sometimes we have to turn them away. Not enough room." Laughter made the walls shake. "They are noisy, *oui*?" She laughed when a man called out loudly. "And my husband has the loudest voice of all." She tossed the last few pieces of bread into the basket. "He doesn't speak German. Do you speak any French?"

"No, but I'm eager to learn."

*"Je pense que vous allez apprendre rapidement."* Smiling, she pushed the door open and held it so Marta could follow her with the filled tureen.

Marta wrote to Rosie.

*At last, I will learn French. I have found a position in a boardinghouse full of bachelors. The house is run by a lovely couple, Herve and Solange Fournier. Madame Fournier insists I call her Solange. She speaks German, but French is her first language. She also speaks Italian and Romanian. She is a fine cook. I will need to learn French quickly if I am to be any help to her. She is enceinte. The baby will come the middle of January.*

Marta sent Mama the Fourniers' address and asked how she and Elise fared.

*Dearest Marta,*

*I am pleased you have found a better situation. Frau Gunnel is a woman to be pitied, not despised. We never know what another person suffers in this life.*

*Do not worry so much about Elise. She helps me in the workroom. She does all the cutting and basting now. My cousin Felda Braun came for a visit. She lost her husband, Reynard, last year, and is very lonely. I took you to Grindelwald when you were a little girl. You loved Reynard's cows. Do you remember? God never blessed Felda and Reynard with children. If anything happens to me, Elise will go to Grindelwald and live with Felda. This is her address . . .*

Marta wrote back immediately.

*How ill are you, Mama? Should I come home?*

Mama's handwriting had changed. The perfectly formed letters

now showed signs of a tremor.

*Do not be afraid for me, Liebling. I am in God's hands, as are you. Remember what we talked about on the mountain before you went to Interlaken. Fly, Liebling. I fly with you. Do not forsake the gathering of believers, Marta. It is the love of brothers and sisters that has strengthened me over the years. We are one in Christ Jesus. Let it be so for you, too. You are precious to me. I love you. Wherever you go, know my heart goes with you.*

*Mama*

Marta wrote to Rosie.

*I'm afraid for Mama. Her last letter made me believe she is dying, but she tells me to fly. Have you seen Elise?*

Each day, Marta got up before dawn and started the fire in the kitchen stove. She baked pull-apart bread drenched in butter and rolled in cinnamon and raisins. She prepared two platters of sliced fruit, then filled a large bowl with *Müsli* and a pitcher with milk. She set out carafes of coffee and hot chocolate. By the time Solange came downstairs, Marta had everything set out on the sideboard for the morning buffet. Marta poured her a cup of hot chocolate as they sat on two stools in the kitchen.

"I've had more rest in the last month than I've had in over a year. You will have to cook all the meals when the baby comes."

"I have some wonderful recipes from the *Hotel Germania*, and I know how to make the best sausage in Switzerland."

"Herve doesn't like German food. I will share my best recipes." Solange winked as she sipped hot chocolate. "More to write in that book you carry."

Marta patted her apron pocket. *"Un jour, quand j'aurai une pension à moi."*

"You are learning French *très rapidement*, though we will have to work harder on your accent." She gave a teasing grimace.

A letter arrived from Rosie.

*I have gone to your home three times this week. I met your mother's cousin, Felda Braun. She is a kind woman. I didn't see Elise. Your mother made no excuses this time. She said Elise doesn't want to see anyone. Your brother attended church last Sunday. I asked about your mother and sister; he said Elise had stayed home to look after your mother. He and your father are going to Bern. Things cannot be too bad if they feel they can leave. . . .*

Marta felt the tension mount inside her. She wanted desperately

to go home and see Mama and Elise for herself, but winter snows had come and Solange's baby could come any hour. Marta could not leave her alone with a boardinghouse full of residents. Torn between fear and guilt, she prayed for God's mercy.

Each day that Herve came with the mail, Marta waited tensely.

"*Rien pour vous aujourd'hui*, Marta."

Each day, she heard the same words. Nothing for her today.

The silence filled her with fear.

## Hoofstuk 6

Tien dae later kry Marta ’n brief van Rosie.

> *Ek het jou ma en pa by die kerk gesien. Hermann het ook gekom, maar Elise was nie daar nie. Die meeste mense dink sy is terug na Thun toe. Ek het jou ma gevra of ek vir Elise kan kom kuier. Sy het my gevra hoeveel jy my vertel het en ek het gesê alles. Sy het nie baie gelukkig gelyk nie, maar ek het haar gerusgestel. Sy het gesê Elise is nie gereed om enigiemand te sien nie. Ek sal volgende week weer probeer ...*

Mamma skryf ’n week later.

> *Rosie sê jy het haar vertel en niemand anders nie. Rosie is ’n goeie kind en sal nie uitpraat nie. Sy het ’n sagte hart. Pappa het na Thun toe gegaan. Die Meyers het die huis toegemaak en is terug Zürich toe. ’n Man het gevra of hy gekom het om na die huis te kyk. Die Meyers is van plan om te verkoop.*

Marta antwoord met ’n kort briefie.

> *Noudat die Meyers gevlug het, kan Mamma dalk vir Elise help om uit te kom. Rosie wil vir haar ’n vriendin wees, Mamma. Moedig Elise asseblief aan om saam met haar te kuier.*

Mamma skryf terug.

> *Dit gaan beter met Elise. Sy help my in die winkel. Pappa stem saam dat dit vir haar die beste is om hier by my te bly. Sy huil so maklik.*

Marta probeer om dit uit haar gedagtes te verban, maar sy kan nie. Snags droom sy van Elise. Sy droom dat sy die Meyers se huis afbrand terwyl hulle binnekant is.

“Gaan stap ’n entjie.” Warner stoot haar eenkant toe. “As jy nie nou ophou knie nie, gaan ons bakstene in plaas van brode hê!”

“Ek’s jammer.”

“Vandat jy van Steffisburg teruggekom het, is jy nie jouself nie. Jy het jou suster gehelp, nie waar nie? Dis nou al ’n maand. Is jy gereed

om vir my te sê wat gebeur het?”

“Nee.” Sy neem daar en dan ’n besluit. “Ek kan nie meer hier werk nie. Ek gaan Montreux toe.”

Warner se kop ruk op. “Net omdat ek jou nie wil laat deeg knie nie?”

“Die deeg het niks daarmee te doen nie.”

“Nou hoekom dan?”

“Ek moet wegkom.” Sy bars in trane uit.

Die enigste geluid in die kombuis is die pruttende sop. Almal kyk grootoog na haar. “Gaan aan met julle werk!” bulder Warner. Hy stuur Marta na die koue kamer langs die kombuis. “Is jy seker jy vlug nie?”

Sy gaan sit op die bed, haar kop in haar hande. “Wat maak dit saak?” Sy vee haar gesig af. Sy dink aan Elise wat steeds op dieselfde plek bly, wat vir die res van haar lewe ’n kind gaan bly. “Ek weet wat ek in die lewe wil hê en ek gaan dit kry. Ek gaan nie toelaat dat dinge met my gebeur nie. Ek gaan dinge laat gebeur!”

Warner kom sit langs haar. “Hoekom is jy so haastig? Jy is nou eers 16. Jy het nog baie tyd.”

“Jy verstaan nie, Warner.” Partykeer verstaan sy ook nie. Die een dag wil sy so ver en so vinnig moontlik weghardloop, en dan kry haar skuldgevoelens die oorhand en wonder sy of sy maar moet huis toe gaan, Mamma en Elise versorg, en van haar drome moet vergeet om ’n beter lewe vir haarself te skep.

“Jy wil ’n hotel besit, nè?” Hy snork. “Dink jy dat jy dan ’n beter lewe gaan hê? Dis werk, werk en nogmaals werk. Dis al wat jy ooit gaan doen as jy jou sin kry.”

“Werk, werk en nogmaals werk is al wat ek nou het.” As sy huis toe gaan, sal Pappa vir altyd haar lewe beheer. “Ek werk eerder vir myself as om te werk om iemand anders se sakke vol geld te maak!”

“Jou hardkoppige kind.” Toe sy wil opstaan, sluit sy hand om haar gewrig en hy trek haar weer neer. “Daar is nog so baie wat ek jou van Duitse kookkuns moet leer.”

“Ek het genoeg by jou geleer, Warner.” Sy glimlag flou. “En ek is dankbaar. Maar ek moet Montreux toe gaan.”

“Wat gaan jou ouers daarvan sê?”

“Niks nie.” Hermann het sy droom verwesenlik en by die weermag aangesluit. Mamma sal altyd vir Elise hê, en Elise vir Mamma. Pappa kan gerus die verantwoordelikheid dra vir die mense wat God aan hom toevertrou het.

“Ek sien die seer in jou, Marta.”

Sy wikkel haar los en gaan terug kombuis toe om te werk.

Warnar Brennholtz kom groet haar op die stasie. Sy het nie verwag om hom weer te sien nie. Toe sy probeer dankie sê dat hy haar kom afsien het, wil haar woorde nie kom nie.

"Jy het nie vir jou mense gesê nie, nè?"

Sy skud haar kop.

Warner tree nader, druk 'n paar swaar muntstukke in haar palm en vou haar vingers bo-oor hulle.

"Marta, moenie huil nie. Geniet hierdie geld; moet dit nie spaar nie." Hy plant sy hande ferm op haar skouers. "Ek gaan soos 'n pa met jou praat. Jy is jonk. Geniet die lewe wanneer jy in Montreux aankom. Gaan dans! Lag! Sing!" Hy soen haar op albei wange en laat haar gaan.

Marta val agter die laaste man in wat op die trein klim.

Warner roep na haar voordat sy by die passasierswa ingaan. "Skryf vir my wanneer jy jou hotel het." Hy glimlag breed. "Dalk sal ek vir jou kom kook!"

***

Luisa von Olman nooi Marta om by hulle te bly totdat sy in een van die hotelle of restaurante in Montreux werk kry. Marta het gedink dit gaan maklik wees. Montreux is teen die berghang genestel en huise, herehuise en deftige hotelle sit soos oordadige neste teen die paaie wat deur die klowe kronkel. Welgestelde gaste stap langs paadjies tussen lindebome waar die geur van laventel en lelies hang, of sit op tuinstoele en geniet die uitsig op die hemelsblou Genèvemeer. Kelners bedien koek met gesmelte sjokolade.

Marta loop dae lank met die steil straatjies op en af. Nie een van die deftige restaurante en hotelle stel belang in 'n meisie wat net Duits magtig is nie. Toe sy haar later tot minder gegoede woonbuurte wend, sien sy 'n "Hulp Gesoek"-bordjie in die venster van Ludwig's Eatery. Te oordeel na die plek se verwaarloosde buitekant, kan Marta verstaan waarom.

Die eienares, Frau Gunnel, knik saaklik vir Marta. "Jy het 'n week om jouself te bewys. Kos en losies en 30 frank 'n maand." Marta sê niks oor die swak betaling nie. "Hedda!" roep Frau Gunnel. 'n Mooi blondine besig om bierbekers op 'n skinkbord uit te pak, kyk in hulle rigting. Twee ander meisies wat ouer as Marta is, is swyend en kop

onderstebo aan die werk. Frau Gunnel kyk weer na Marta en skud haar kop. "Ek hoop jy is so goed as wat jou papiere sê jy is." Sy het 'n bak in 'n armgreep terwyl sy met die ander heftig roer.

Hedda lei Marta boontoe. Sy kyk oor haar skouer en lig haar wenkbroue. "Ek's verbaas dat jy met al jou kwalifikasies hiernatoe gekom het, Fräulein."

Sy kyk na die verslete mure. "Ongelukkig praat ek nie Frans of Engels nie."

"Ek ook nie." Hedda maak 'n deur oop en staan opsy. "Dis waar ons slaap. Dis klein maar gerieflik. Ek hoop nie jy skrik vir muise nie. Hulle het 'n nes iewers in die muur. 'n Mens kan hulle in die nag hoor skarrel. Jy kan daardie bed kry."

Marta sien 'n ry houtslaapbanke met onaanloklike, grys verematrasse wat aan die voetenent opgerol is. Dis 'n koue kamer. Smiddae is die kamer swak verlig, want die klein, smal vensters kyk oos. En daar is nie gordyne om die oggendson uit te hou nie. Toe Marta uitkyk, sien sy net leë blombakke en die straat onder haar.

"Ek gaan nie meer lank hier wees nie," kom dit van Hedda in die deur. "Ek gaan met Arnalt Falken trou. Het jy al van hom gehoor?"

"Ek's nuut in Montreux."

"Sy pa is baie ryk. Hulle bly in 'n herehuis bo in die straat. Arnalt het een aand alleen gekom en 'n bier en wors bestel. Hy sê hy het een kyk na my gegee en verlief geraak."

Marta dink aan Elise. Hedda het ook blou oë en lang, blonde hare. Sy hoop die meisie weet wat sy doen.

Hedda knik na die venster. "Frau Gunnel sal van jou verwag om blomme te plant. Sy het my verlede jaar vir hulle laat betaal."

"Hoekom moet ons daarvoor betaal?"

Sy trek haar skouers op. "Sy sê dis ons wat hulle gaan geniet."

Marta laat val haar skouersak op die bed. "As Frau Gunnel die buitekant van die gebou wil versier, sal sy moet betaal, anders gaan daar nie blomme wees nie."

"Ek sou nie met haar stry nie, Fräulein, nie as jy jou werk wil hou nie. Die blomme kos nie te veel nie, en die gaste is nie suinig met hulle fooitjies nie." Sy lag. "Arnalt het 'n tien frank-munt by my hals laat inval toe hy die eerste keer gekom het."

Marta draai weg van die venster. "Niemand gaan enigiets voor by my rok ingooi nie."

"Hulle sal as jy vriendelik is." Die glinstering in Hedda se oë verklap dat sy meer begaan is oor haar geld as oor haar reputasie.

* * *

Teen die einde van die eerste week weet Marta van twee maniere waarop die restaurant verbeter kan word. Toe sy Frau Gunnel oor die swak besigheid hoor kla, gaan praat Marta met haar.

“Met ’n paar veranderings sal u meer besigheid inkry.”

Frau Gunnel kyk na haar. “Veranderings? Watse veranderings?”

“Dit sal nie veel kos om die voorste blombakke helder te verf en mooi blomme daarin te plant nie. Die spyskaarte is taaierig gevat. U kan nuwes laat maak en hulle in stewige lêers sit. En die spyskaart kan dalk af en toe verander word.”

Frau Gunnel se ronde gesig verkleur en sy plant haar hande op haar breë heupe. Sy kyk Marta minagtend op en af. “Jy is 16 en jy dink jy is so slim met jou fantastiese sertifikaat en verwysings. Jy weet niks nie!” Sy ruk haar kop. “Gaan terug kombuis toe!”

Marta draai om. Sy wou nie die vrou beledig nie.

’n Paar minute later kom Frau Gunnel kombuis toe en aan die manier waarop sy ’n homp beesvleis opkap, lyk dit of sy probeer om ’n lewende dier dood te maak. “Ek weet hoekom die klante nie kom nie. Ek het een mooi kelnerin gehad wat die mense getrek het voordat sy besluit het om met een van hulle te trou. En nou het ek klein Fräulein Marta wat so vaal soos ’n brood en so vriendelik soos *Sauerkraut* is!”

Niemand in die kombuis kyk op nie. Marta voel hoe haar gesig warm word. “Niemand wil in ’n vuil restaurant eet nie.” Marta koes net betyds uit die vlieënde mes se pad. Sy pluk haar voorskoot af, gooi dit soos ’n mantel oor die geplunderde beesvleis en storm boontoe. Sy gooi haar paar besittings in ’n sak, marsjeer ondertoe en uit straat toe. Oral gaan staan die mense en staar toe Frau Gunnel haar vanuit die deur staan en skel.

Teen die tyd dat die vrou die deur toeslaan, is Marta so warm dat dit voel of die stoom uit haar opslaan. Sy loop eerder opdraande as afdraande. Sy klop aan die een deur na die volgende en doen navraag. Die eerste paar maak die deur oop, gee een kyk, deins terug en maak die deur in haar gesig toe. Marta, steeds siedend, besef hoe sy moet lyk en probeer kalmeer.

Wat nou? Sy het nie ’n werk nie. Nie ’n dak oor haar kop nie. Haar vooruitsigte is meer benard as toe sy ’n maand gelede in Montreux aangekom het. Sy wil nie weer na Luisa von Olman teruggaan en ’n las wees nie. Sy wil nie huis toe gaan en erken dat sy onsuksesvol was nie. Sy sak vooroor en druk haar gesig in haar hande. “Here, ek weet

ek is onmoontlik, maar ek werk hard!" Sy baklei teen haar trane. "Wat moet ek nou doen?"

Iemand praat met haar. "Mademoiselle?"

Sy bars in gefrustreerde trane uit. "Ek het hiernatoe gekom om Frans te leer!"

Die man slaan so gemaklik oor na Duits asof hy 'n handskoen uittrek en dit eenkant neergooi. "Voel jy nie lekker nie, Fräulein?"

"Nee. Ek is werkloos. Ek soek werk." Sy maak verskoning en vee haar gesig af. Sy skat die man voor haar in die tagtig. Hy dra 'n duur pak en leun swaar op sy kierie.

"Ek het 'n entjie kom stap. Gee jy om as ek sit, Fräulein?"

"Nee, natuurlik nie. Sy skuif op om vir hom plek te maak en wonder of hy van haar verwag om te loop.

"Ek het verby 'n huis geloop met 'n kennisgewing in Duits, Frans en Italiaans." Hy sak dankbaar langs haar neer. Hy lig sy kierie en beduie. "Ek dink dis so drie of vier strate op in daardie rigting."

Sy bedank hom en soek vir die res van die middag na die huis. Toe sy op die punt is om op te gee, sien sy die bordjie in die venster van 'n drieverdiepinghuis. Die verf is nie besig om af te dop nie en die kosyne is rooi geverf. Sy hoor 'n gedempte gelag toe sy na die voordeur toe loop. Terwyl sy oor haar rok stryk en die stringetjies klam krulle agter haar ore indruk, stuur sy 'n desperate skietgebed op en klop aan die deur. Sy vou haar hande voor haar en dwing haarself om te glimlag terwyl sy wag. Sy kan maar net hoop dat sy respektabel lyk en nie soos 'n verslonste boemelaar wat die hele middag bergop en -af geloop het nie.

Iemand praat Frans agter haar. Marta wip toe 'n man sy hand verby haar steek en die deur oopmaak. "Verskoon my?"

Hierdie keer praat hy Duits. "Jy kan net ingaan. Hulle gaan jou nie hier buite hoor nie. Hulle het alreeds begin bedien."

Marta loop agter hom in. "Sal u asseblief vir die eienaar gaan sê dat ek hier is oor die kennisgewing in die venster."

Hy loop vinnig in die gang af en verdwyn in 'n ander vertrek.

Die geure in die huis laat Marta se maag grom. Sy het vroeg die oggend laas geëet, en toe net 'n klein bakkie *Müsli*. Sy skrik toe sy mans hard hoor lag. Sy hoor hulle gesels en weer lag, 'n bietjie sagter hierdie keer.

'n Jong, aantreklike donkerkop vrou verskyn in die gang. Sy dra 'n blou rok met 'n hoë kraag en lang moue onder 'n wit voorskoot en sy is hoog swanger. Daar is 'n blos op haar wange en sy vee met die

rugkant van haar hand oor haar voorkop toe sy na Marta toe stap. “Mademoiselle?”

“Fräulein Marta Schneider, Madame.” Sy maak ’n kniebuiging. “Ek het vir die werk kom aansoek doen.” Sy haal haar dokumente uit.

“Ek is eintlik besig om aandete te bedien.” Sy praat vlot Duits en kyk oor haar skouer toe iemand roep.

“Ek kan nou help, as u wil. Ek het in die kombuis van die *Hotel Germania* in Interlaken gewerk. Ons kan later oor die werk praat.”

“*Merci*! Los jou goed sommer by die deur. Ons het ’n kamer vol honger leeus wat gevoer moet word.”

Daar is ’n lang tafel in die eetkamer en die regop stoele aan weerskante is vol mans, meestal jonk, en te oordeel na hulle klere, professioneel. Die mans se luide gesels, gelag en die gerinkel van wynglase weergalm deur die vertrek. Kort-kort roep iemand dat die broodmandjie aangestuur moet word en wynbottels word oor en weer aangegee.

“Solange!” roep die aantreklike man aan die hoof van die tafel. Solange loop na hom toe en sit haar arm om sy skouer terwyl sy in sy oor fluister. Hy kyk na Marta en knik.

Solange klap haar hande teen mekaar. Die mans rondom die tafel word stil. Sy wys na Marta terwyl sy vinnig in Frans praat. Die mans kyk vlugtig na Marta voor hulle verder gesels. Toe Solange na ’n groot sopkom op die punt van die tafel wys, haas Marta haar soontoe en probeer die swaar bak optel. “Nee, Mademoiselle,” protesteer Solange vinnig. “Dis te swaar. Laat hulle hulle borde vir jou aangee.”

Terwyl sy vir die mans van die dik, geurige bredie inskep, kramp haar maag van die honger. Daar is net genoeg in die sopkom om vir elke man ’n vol bak te skep. Sy volg Solange na die kombuis en plaas die leë bak op die werktafel. Solange sak op ’n stoel neer. “Jy het goed gedoen, Mademoiselle! Nie ’n druppel gemors nie.” Sy lig haar voorskoot en klad die sweet van haar voorkop af. “Dank die Here dat jy juis nou gekom het. Daardie mans ... ” Sy lag en skud haar kop. “Hulle eet soos wolwe.”

Marta kan haar maag hoor grom. Solange lig haar wenkbroue. Sy prewel iets in Frans, loop na die oorkant van die vertrek en haal ’n sopbord uit ’n kas. “Eet nou. Ons het ’n paar minute voordat hulle nog wil hê.” Sy vryf haar rug toe sy weer gaan sit.

“Dis heerlik, Madame ... ?”

“Fournier. Solange Fournier. My man, Herve, het aan die hoof van die tafel gesit.”

Marta eet vinnig klaar, en gebruik 'n stukkie brood om die laaste bietjie sous op te vee. Nadat sy haar bord in die wasbak neergesit het, tel sy die kan van die stoof af op. "Moet ek die sopkom weer vol maak?"

Solange knik. "Ek het iemand nodig om my te help om die huis skoon te hou, beddens op te maak, wasgoed te was en in die kombuis te werk."

Marta praat terwyl sy die dik bredie uitskep. "Ek benodig losies, kos en 60 frank 'n maand." Die oomblik toe die woorde uit is, hou Marta haar asem op. Dalk het sy te vinnig gepraat en te veel gevra.

"Jy is 'n meisie wat weet wat jy wil hê en bereid is om te werk." Sy druk met haar hande op haar bobene en staan op. "Hoe gou kan jy begin?"

"Al wat ek moet doen, is om die rugsak wat ek in die portaal gelos het, boontoe te neem."

"*Magnifique*!"

"Bly al daardie mans hier, madame Fournier?"

"Noem my Solange, *s'il vous plaît*." Sy glimlag breed. "En ek sal jou Marta noem." Sy maak 'n mandjie vol brood. "Net 12 van hulle bly hier. Die ander kom eet wanneer hulle in Montreux kom sake doen. 'n Vriend het hulle die eerste keer genooi, en hulle bly terugkom. Soms moet ons hulle wegwys. Nie genoeg plek nie." Die mure sidder van die gelag. "Hulle maak omtrent 'n geraas, *oui*?" Sy lag toe 'n man luid roep. "En my man het die hardste stem van almal." Sy pak 'n laaste paar stukkies brood in die mandjie. "Hy praat nie Duits nie. Kan jy Frans praat?"

"Nee, maar ek wil bitter graag leer."

"*Je pense qui vous allez apprendre rapidement*." Sy glimlag toe sy die deur oopstoot en dit oophou sodat Marta haar met die sopkom kan volg.

Marta skryf vir Rosie.

> *Uiteindelik gaan ek leer Frans praat. Ek het 'n pos in 'n losieshuis vol mans gekry. Die huis behoort aan 'n lieflike paartjie, Herve en Solange Fournier. Madame Fournier dring daarop aan dat ek haar Solange noem. Sy praat Duits, maar Frans is haar eerste taal. Sy praat ook Italiaans en Romeens. Sy is 'n goeie kok. Ek sal gou moet leer Frans praat as ek haar wil help. Sy is swanger en die baba kom teen middel Januarie.*

Marta stuur die Fourniers se adres vir Mamma en vra hoe dit met haar en Elise gaan.

*Liefste Marta*

*Ek is bly dat jou omstandighede verbeter het. Frau Gunnel is 'n vrou om te bejammer, nie te verag nie. Ons weet nooit watter lyding iemand anders in hierdie lewe verduur nie.*

*Moet jou nie so oor Elise bekommer nie. Sy help my in die werkkamer. Sy doen nou al die sny- en rygwerk. My niggie Felda Braun het kom kuier. Haar man, Reynard, is verlede jaar oorlede en sy is baie eensaam. Ek het jou Grindelwald toe geneem toe jy 'n klein dogtertjie was. Jy was mal oor Reynard se koeie. Onthou jy? Die Here het Felda en Reynard nooit met hulle eie kinders geseën nie. As enigiets met my gebeur, sal Elise soontoe gaan en by Felda gaan bly. Hier is haar adres ...*

Marta skryf dadelik terug.

*Hoe siek is Mamma? Moet ek huis toe kom?*

Mamma se handskrif het verander. Die eens sierlike letters toon nou tekens van 'n bewerigheid.

*Moet jou nie oor my bekommer nie, Liebling. Ek is in God se hande, nes jy. Onthou jy waaroor ons daardie dag op die berg gesels het voordat jy Interlaken toe is? Vlieg, Liebling. Ek vlieg saam met jou. Moenie die gemeenskap van die gelowiges verwaarloos nie, Marta. Dit is die liefde van broers en susters wat my deur die jare krag gegee het. Ons is een in Jesus Christus. Mag dit vir jou ook so wees. Jy is kosbaar vir my. Ek het jou lief. Waar jy ook al gaan, weet dat my hart by jou is.*

*Mamma*

Marta skryf aan Rosie.

*Ek is bekommerd oor Mamma. Haar laaste brief het my laat glo dat sy sterwend is, maar sy sê ek moet vlieg. Het jy al vir Elise gesien?*

Marta staan soggens voordag op en maak vuur in die kombuisstoof. Sy bak brood wat in botter gedoop en in kaneel en rosyntjies gerol is. Sy rangskik twee borde met gesnyde vrugte, vul 'n groot skottel met *Müsli* en 'n fles met melk. Sy sorg ook vir koffie en warm sjokolade. Teen die tyd dat Solange ondertoe kom, het Marta die buffet met alles vir die ontbyt gedek.

"Ek het die afgelope maand meer as in die hele jaar gerus. Jy sal vir al die etes moet sorg wanneer die baba kom."

"Ek het wonderlike resepte van die *Hotel Germania*, en ek weet hoe

om die beste wors in Switserland te maak."

"Herve hou nie van Duitse kos nie. Ek sal my resepte met jou deel." Solange knipoog terwyl sy 'n slukkie warm sjokolade vat. "Nog disse vir daardie boek wat jy saam met jou dra."

Marta tik op haar voorskootsak. "*Un jour, quand j'aurai une pension à moi.*"

"Jy is besig om *très rapidement* Frans te leer, maar ons sal harder aan jou aksent moet werk." Sy glimlag tergend.

Sy kry 'n brief van Rosie.

> *Ek was drie maal hierdie week by jou huis. Ek het jou ma se niggie, Felda Braun, ontmoet. Sy is 'n goeie vrou. Ek het nie vir Elise gesien nie. Jou ma het hierdie keer nie verskonings gemaak nie. Sy sê Elise wil niemand sien nie. Jou broer was verlede Sondag by die kerk. Ek het hom oor jou ma en suster uitgevra; hy het gesê dat Elise by die huis gebly het om na jou ma te kyk. Hy en jou pa gaan Bern toe. Dit kan nie te sleg gaan as hulle voel hulle kan weggaan nie …*

Marta voel die spanning in haar opbou. Sy wil dringend huis toe gaan en self sien hoe dit met Mamma en Elise gaan, maar dit het begin sneeu en Solange se baba kan enige oomblik gebore word. Marta kan haar nie met 'n losieshuis vol gaste los nie. Verskeur tussen angs en skuldgevoelens bid sy vir die Here se genade.

Marta wag elke dag gespanne wanneer Herve met die pos inkom.

"*Rien pour vous aujourd'hui*, Marta."

Elke dag hoor sy dieselfde woorde. Daar het niks vir haar gekom nie.

Die stilte vul haar met vrees.

# Chapter 7

Awakening with a start, Marta heard Herve yelling. He pounded on her door and she called out to him. She slipped into her coat and opened the door enough to look out. “Solange?”

*“Oui! Oui!”* He spoke French so fast, Marta couldn’t understand him. She waved him away and told him she would come down in a moment. Throwing on her clothes, she headed downstairs while still buttoning her shirtwaist. Men had come out into the hallway. She waved them back inside as she hurried down the second-floor hall to the Fourniers’ large bedroom. Herve had pulled a chair over to the side of the bed and held Solange’s hand. He still wore his nightclothes. Marta stood at the end of the bed, not sure what to do.

“Ah, Marta,” Solange said, but her relief was short-lived as pain made her gasp. Herve stood and started rattling off French again, pacing back and forth, raking his hands through his dark hair.

Marta gathered Herve’s clothes from the floor and dumped them in his lap. “Get dressed and go for the . . .” Marta searched for the French word for *midwife*. Solange had taught her. What was it? “*Sage-femme! Maintenant*, Herve. *Vite. Vite!* Don’t forget your shoes.”

Men talked in the corridor. Hoping they hadn’t delayed Herve, Marta stepped out. “Is anyone a doctor?” They looked at one another and shook their heads. “Then unless you want to help deliver a baby, go back to your rooms.” They disappeared like a thundering herd of mountain goats, doors closing quickly behind them.

*Oh, God, what do I do now?* Pretending calm she didn’t feel, Marta came back into the bedroom. Other than one afternoon lecture at the *Haushaltungsschule Bern* on assisting at a childbirthing, Marta knew nothing at all of such matters. But she supposed she could do better than a panic-stricken husband. “Everything will be fine, Solange. The midwife will be here soon.”

An hour later, the door slammed and feet pounded up the stairs. Herve spoke so rapidly, Marta couldn’t understand a word he said. She did understand the look on Solange’s face. “The midwife isn’t coming.”

“Herve says she is delivering someone else’s baby. *Mon Dieu.* What are we going to do?” She groaned, another contraction coming within a few short minutes of the last one. Herve looked wild-eyed. He moaned with his wife, looking from her to Marta. When he started talking again, Marta cut him off and told him to boil a big pot of

water and bring clean towels and a knife. When he just stood there, gaping, Marta repeated her words with quiet authority. "Go, Herve! Everything will be all right."

Solange began to sob and speak French as rapidly as her husband had. Marta took her hand. "German, Solange, or French more slowly."

"Keep Herve out of here. He makes me nervous. He gets upset if I so much as cut myself, and this is—" Another contraction came and stopped her from saying more. "Do you know what to do?"

Marta didn't want to lie and claim knowledge she didn't have. "God made women to have babies, Solange, and He knows what He's doing." She put her hand on Solange's damp brow. "You're going to manage this as well as you do everything else, *ma chère*."

Herve came up with a pile of towels. He disappeared again and returned with a bowl and steaming kettle. When he came to the bed, Solange raised her head. *"Partez! Sortez!"* Stricken, Herve went, closing the door quietly behind him.

Solange relaxed against the pillows Marta had put behind her, for a few minutes at least, until the next contraction took her breath away. Marta worked through the night, dabbing Solange's forehead, holding her hand, speaking words of encouragement. Solange screamed when the baby pushed his way into the world, just as the sun peeked over the horizon. Marta tied two strings around the cord and cut it with shaking hands. Wrapping the wailing baby boy in a soft blanket, she placed him in Solange's arms.

"He's so beautiful." Solange gazed raptly into her son's face. She looked pale and drained, damp tendrils of dark hair framing her face. "Where is Herve?"

"Downstairs, I think, waiting to find out if you and the baby are well."

She laughed. "Tell him he can come back now. I won't bite him."

The door opened and a heavyset, gray-haired woman came hurrying in. Her face looked weary with exhaustion.

"Madame DuBois!" Solange smiled. "He's already come."

"So I see." The midwife removed her shawl and tossed it aside as she approached the bed. "Two babies in one night." She drew down the blanket to look at the baby. "Herve is bringing warm water and salt. We must wash you both to prevent infection." She drew blankets aside and encouraged Solange to nurse the baby. "It will bring the afterbirth." She straightened and turned to Marta. "We must strip the soiled sheets and replace them." Marta followed the woman's quick

instructions.

Herve came in with another pot of hot water and a bag of salt. “You have a son, Herve.” Tears of joy ran down Solange’s cheeks. The midwife told him to wash his hands before he touched either babe or mother. Herve sloshed water into a basin and scrubbed past his wrists, grabbing one of the towels. When he sat on the edge of the bed, Solange gasped. Herve dropped to his knees beside the bed, murmuring endearments as he kissed Solange and beheld his son.

Feeling useless, Marta gathered up the soiled sheets. “I should soak these right away.” No one noticed when she left. When she came downstairs, she found several men dressed for work sitting in the empty dining room. She had had no time to set out the usual breakfast buffet. “*Müsli* this morning, gentlemen. And no lunch today. You’ll need to find a nice restaurant. We’ve had a busy night. The Fourniers have a healthy son. Everything will be back to normal tomorrow morning.”

The midwife came down to the kitchen. “Solange and the baby are sleeping. Herve fell asleep on the settee. You did well, mademoiselle. Solange speaks very highly of you.”

“Solange did all the work, Madame DuBois. All I did was dab her forehead, hold her hand . . . and *pray*.” Madame DuBois laughed with her. “You’ll need something to eat before you leave.” Marta prepared an *omelette*, fried bread, and hot chocolate. Madame DuBois left as soon as she finished breakfast, and Marta went upstairs to her attic room to rest for a few hours before starting preparations for dinner.

Unexpected emotion welled up inside Marta. She had never seen anything more beautiful than the way Solange and Herve looked at one another and at the perfect infant they had made together. Would a man ever look at her with such love? Would she ever have a child of her own? Perhaps her father was right: she had no beauty to offer and she lacked Mama’s gentle spirit. How many times had Papa said no man would look at her, and in truth, not one of the bachelors in the house had given her a second look, other than to ask for some needed service. *“Mademoiselle, would you mind ironing my suit?” “How much to do my laundry, mademoiselle?” “More sausages, mademoiselle.”*

Marta put her arm over her eyes and fought tears of longing and disappointment. She must concentrate on what she could have with hard work and perseverance, and she must not long for things beyond reach. Solange had her Herve. Rosie would have her Arik. Marta would have her freedom.

She could thank God she would never again live under her father's roof. She would never again bear the bruises of a beating. She would never again sit in silence as a man told her she was ugly, ill-tempered, and selfish.

*"Fly,"* Mama said. *"Be like an eagle."* In those words, Mama had acknowledged that Marta would not have the comfort of a loving husband or children of her own. *"An eagle flies alone."*

As she fell asleep, Marta thought she heard a voice. "Mama?" She dreamed Mama flew above her, face radiant, arms spread like angel's wings. Elise stood below, hands raised, snow swirling around her until she disappeared.

* * *

Over the next few weeks, Marta worked such long, hard hours she had no time to think about anything but what needed to be done. Herve hired another servant, Edmee, who took over the household chores. Marta prepared all the meals for the Fourniers and twelve boarders and looked after Solange during her first weeks of recuperation. Baby Jean proved demanding of his mother's time. After the first few days, Herve slept in the parlor.

Herve came into the kitchen one afternoon. "Two letters, Marta!" He tossed them onto the worktable. "Ah, *ragoût de bœuf*." He lifted the lid from the bubbling beef stew and inhaled while Marta slid the bread from the oven and set it on the counter to cool. She picked up the two letters, one from Elise, another from Felda Braun.

Heart thumping with dread, Marta took a paring knife and sliced both open. She felt something inside Elise's envelope and carefully opened the note. Folded inside were Mama's gold earbobs.

*Mama gave these to me before she died. I love you, Marta. I have asked God to forgive me. I hope you will, too.*

*Elise*

Marta sat down heavily on the stool.

*"Est-ce qu'il y a quelque chose de mal?"* Herve stood looking at her.

What was wrong? Marta remembered the dream and felt her throat close tight with pain. Hands shaking, she put the earbobs onto the note and folded it back into the envelope. Slipping it into her apron pocket, she opened Felda Braun's letter.

*Dear Marta,*

*It is with greatest sorrow that I write this letter. . . .*

"Mademoiselle?"

Marta couldn't see through her tears. While she was here helping

Solange bring a baby into the world, her mother was dying. She dropped Felda's letter and covered her face. *"Ma mère est morte."*

Herve spoke quietly. She didn't understand anything he said. He came around the worktable and put his hand on her shoulder. "I should've gone home." Marta rocked back and forth, muffling her sobs with her apron. Herve squeezed gently and left the kitchen. "I'm sorry, Mama. Oh, God, I'm so sorry." Trembling violently, she picked up Felda Braun's letter, expecting further details of her mother's passing and Elise's move to Grindelwald.

> *Your mother wrote to me some months ago about her illness and asked if I might consider taking Elise to live with me when her time came. I went to Steffisburg immediately to speak with her in person. I hardly recognized Anna. The doctor confirmed her own belief that she had consumption. She did not want you to know she was dying because she knew you would come home. She said if you did, your father would never let you go again. She said the minister would write to me when it was time to come for Elise.*
>
> *When I went home, I began to prepare her way. I told my friends about your mother's illness and how your sister had lost her husband in a tragic accident. In this way, I could assure Elise that she could raise her baby without fear of scandal.*

Marta went cold. *Her baby?* She read more quickly.

> *When I heard from the minister, I went immediately to Steffisburg, but Elise had already disappeared. Your father thought he would find her in Thun. Everyone was looking for her, but I grieve to tell you that we did not find her in time. Your friend Rosie found her body by a stream not far from the house.*

Marta cried until she felt sick. She pulled herself together enough to set the table and serve dinner. Clearly, Herve had told the men about her mother, for they offered condolences and spoke in subdued voices. Marta did not mention Elise. Edmee stayed to help wash dishes and clean the kitchen, insisting Marta go upstairs to her attic bedroom and try to rest. Curling on her side, Marta cried as she remembered dreaming of Elise standing in the snow with her hands raised to heaven.

A few days later, Marta received a wire from her father.

Return immediately. Needed in shop.

Tears of fury filled Marta's eyes. She shook with the power of her rage. Not one word about Mama or Elise. Crumpling the message, she threw it in the stove and watched it burn.

* * *

Solange sat in the kitchen with Marta, baby Jean sleeping contentedly in a basket on the worktable. *"Je comprends."* She took Marta's hand. "God brought you to us when we needed you most, and now you must go. *C'est la vie, n'est-ce pas?*"

Marta felt little guilt about leaving. Solange had healed quickly and was eager to resume her duties. Edmee had agreed to stay on full-time. She was a hard worker like Marta and would help with the baby while Solange resumed the cooking.

Solange lifted the baby from his warm nest. "Would you like to hold Jean one more time before you leave?"

"Yes. Please." Marta held him close, pretending just for a moment he belonged to her. She sang a lullaby in German as she walked around the kitchen. Then she placed Jean in his mother's arms. *"Danke."*

Tears slipped down Solange's cheeks. "Write to us, Marta. Herve and I want to know what becomes of you."

Marta nodded, unable to speak. As she came out of the kitchen into the hallway, Herve and the bachelors stood waiting. Each wished her well as she passed by. When she reached the door, Herve gave her a brotherly kiss on each cheek and handed her an envelope. "A gift from all of us."

She looked from him to the other men. Pressing her lips together so she wouldn't cry, she gave a deep, respectful curtsy and left the house. Despair filled her as she walked to the train station. She looked up at the departure times. A dutiful daughter would return to Steffisburg, work in the shop without complaining, and take care of her father in his old age. *Honor your father and mother,* God commanded, *that your days may be long in the land the Lord your God will give you.*

Marta took a coach to Lausanne, where she boarded a train to Paris.

# Hoofstuk 7

Marta skrik vervaard wakker toe Herve gil. Hy hamer aan haar deur en sy roep dat sy kom. Sy trek haar jas aan en maak die deur groot genoeg oop om uit te kyk. "Solange?"

"*Oui! Oui!*" Hy praat so vinnig in Frans dat Marta hom nie kan verstaan nie. Sy wys hy moet loop en sê dat sy oor 'n minuut onder sal wees. Sy verklee vinnig en is nog besig om haar bloes toe te knoop toe sy die trappies afstorm. Van die mans het in die gang kom staan. Sy wys hulle moet terug kamer toe terwyl sy na die Fourniers se groot slaapkamer op die tweede vloer hardloop. Herve het 'n stoel teenaan die bed getrek en hou Solange se hand vas. Hy het steeds sy nagklere aan. Marta kom staan aan die onderpunt van die bed, nie seker wat sy moet doen nie.

"Aa, Marta," sê Solange, maar haar verligting is van korte duur en 'n paar oomblikke later moet sy haar asem weer skerp intrek van die pyn. Herve staan op en begin weer in Frans babbel terwyl hy op en af loop en sy vingers deur sy donker hare trek.

Marta tel Herve se klere op en stop hulle in sy arms. "Trek aan en gaan haal die ... " Marta soek na die Franse woord vir *vroedvrou*. Solange het haar geleer. Wat is dit? "*Sage-femme! Maintenant*, Herve. *Vite. Vite!* En moenie jou skoene vergeet nie."

Die mans praat buite in die gang. Marta gaan uit om seker te maak dat hulle Herve nie vertraag nie. "Is enigiemand 'n dokter?" Hulle kyk na mekaar en skud kop. "Nou ja, tensy iemand 'n baba wil vang, kan julle na julle kamers toe gaan." Hulle verdwyn soos 'n verskrikte trop bergbokke en deure word vinnig toegemaak.

*Here, wat moet ek nou doen?* Met 'n uiterlike kalmte wat sy nie voel nie, gaan Marta terug kamer toe. Buiten een middaglesing by die *Haushaltungsschule Bern* oor assistensie tydens kindergeboorte, weet Marta niks van die onderwerp nie. Maar sy is seker sy kan beter as Solange se paniekbevange man vaar. "Alles sal goed gaan, Solange. Die vroedvrou gaan nou-nou hier wees."

'n Uur later word 'n deur toegeslaan en storm iemand die trappe op.

Herve praat so vinnig dat Marta nie ’n woord verstaan nie. Sy verstaan wel die kyk op Solange se gesig. “Die vroedvrou gaan nie kom nie.”

“Herve sê sy is besig met ’n ander bevalling. *Mon Dieu.* Wat gaan ons doen?” Sy kreun, die volgende kontraksie net ’n paar kort minute ná die vorige. Herve lyk verwilderd. Hy kreun saam met sy vrou en kyk van haar na Marta. Toe hy weer begin praat, maak Marta hom stil en sê hy moet ’n groot pot water kook, en skoon handdoeke en ’n mes bring. Toe hy net oopmond bly staan, herhaal Marta haar woorde met ’n stille gesag. “Gaan nou, Herve! Alles sal goed gaan.”

Solange begin snik en haar Frans kom nou net so vinnig soos Herve s’n. Marta neem haar hand. “Duits, Solange, of stadiger Frans.”

“Ek wil nie hê Herve moet hier wees nie. Hy maak my senuweeagtig. Hy kan dit nie eens verduur as ek my vinger raaksny nie, en dit is – ” Nog ’n kontraksie oorrompel haar en sy kan nie verder praat nie. “Weet jy wat om te doen?”

Marta wil nie jok en voorgee dat sy oor kennis beskik wat sy nie het nie. “God het vroue gemaak om babas te kry, Solange, en Hy weet wat Hy doen.” Sy plaas haar hand op Solange se klam voorkop. “Jy gaan dit net so goed doen soos alles wat jy doen, *ma chère*.”

Herve kom met ’n stapel handdoeke boontoe en verdwyn weer om ’n skottel en stomende ketel te gaan haal. Toe hy by die bed kom, lig Solange haar kop. “*Partez! Sortez!*” ’n Verskrikte Herve maak hom uit die voete en trek die deur sag agter hom toe.

Solange ontspan teen die kussings wat Marta agter haar opgestapel het totdat die volgende kontraksie haar ’n paar minute later uitasem laat. Marta werk deur die nag. Sy klad Solange se voorkop, hou haar hand vas en bemoedig haar. Solange gil toe sy die laaste keer druk en die baba gebore word, net toe die son oor die horison loer. Marta knoop die naelstring en knip dit met bewende hande. Nadat sy die kermende babaseuntjie in ’n sagte kombers toegedraai het, plaas sy hom in Solange se arms.

“Hy is pragtig.” Solange kyk verruk na haar seuntjie se gesiggie. Sy lyk bleek en uitgemergel, haar donker hare klam om haar gesig. “Waar is Herve?”

“Onder, dink ek, angstig om te hoor hoe dit met jou en die baba gaan.”

Sy lag. “Sê hy kan nou maar terugkom. Ek sal hom nie byt nie.”

Die deur gaan oop en ’n swaar, gryskop vrou kom ingestorm. Haar gesig is vaal van uitputting.

“Madame DuBois!” Solange glimlag. “Hy het reeds gekom.”

"Ek sien so." Nadat die vroedvrou haar sjaal afgegooi en eenkant laat val het, loop sy tot by die bed. "Twee babas in een nag." Sy lig die kombers en kyk na die baba. "Herve is op pad met warm water en sout. Ons moet julle al twee was om infeksie te voorkom." Sy trek die komberse eenkant toe en moedig Solange aan om die baba te voed. "Dit sal die nageboorte uitbring." Sy kom orent en draai na Marta. "Ons moet die vuil lakens afhaal en met skones vervang." Marta volg die vrou se vinnige instruksies.

Herve kom met nog 'n pot warm water en 'n sak sout. "Jy het 'n seun, Herve." Trane van vreugde loop oor Solange se wange. Die vroedvrou beveel hom om sy hande te was voordat hy aan die baba of ma mag vat. Herve gooi water in 'n kom en nadat hy tot by sy elmboë geskrop het, gryp hy een van die handdoeke. Toe hy op die kant van die bed gaan sit, trek Solange haar asem skerp in. Herve sak op sy knieë langs die bed neer en prewel troetelwoorde terwyl hy Solange soen en ontroerd na sy seuntjie kyk.

Skielik voel Marta oorbodig en sy maak die vuil lakens bymekaar. "Ek gaan hulle sommer dadelik week." Niemand sien toe sy uitloop nie. Toe sy onder kom, is daar 'n paar mans wat in die leë eetkamer staan. Sy het nie tyd om die gewone buffet-ontbyt voor te sit nie. "Dis *müsli* vanoggend, menere. En daar gaan nie vandag middagete wees nie. Julle sal by 'n goeie restaurant moet gaan eet. Ons het 'n besige nag agter die rug. Die Fourniers het 'n gesonde seuntjie. Môre-oggend sal alles weer normaal wees."

Die vroedvrou kom af kombuis toe. "Solange en die baba slaap. Herve het sommer op die sitbank aan die slaap geraak. Jy het goed gedoen, Mademoiselle. Solange praat met groot lof van jou."

"Solange het al die werk gedoen, madame DuBois. Al wat ek gedoen het, was om haar voorkop af te vee, haar hand vas te hou ... en te *bid*." Madame DuBois lag saam met haar. "U sal iets moet eet voordat u gaan." Marta maak 'n omelet, roosterbrood en warm sjokolade. Madame DuBois vertrek direk na sy geëet het, en Marta gaan na haar solderkamer toe om vir 'n paar uur te rus voordat sy met die aandete begin.

Die emosie wel onverwags in haar op. Sy het nog nooit iets so moois gesien soos die manier waarop Solange en Herve na mekaar en na hulle volmaakte babatjie gekyk het nie. Sal 'n man ooit met soveel liefde na haar kyk? Gaan sy ooit haar eie kindjie hê? Dalk was haar pa reg: sy het nie skoonheid om te bied nie en sy het nie Mamma se sagte gees nie. Pappa het male sonder tal gesê dat geen man na haar sal kyk

nie. En die feit is, nie een van die ongetroude mans in die huis het haar al ’n tweede kyk gegee nie, buiten om te vra as hulle iets nodig het. “*Mademoiselle, sal jy my hemp stryk?” “Hoeveel om my wasgoed te doen, mademoiselle?” “Nog ’n stukkie wors, mademoiselle*.”

Marta hou haar arm oor haar oë en baklei teen die trane van verlange en teleurstelling. Sy moet konsentreer op dit wat sy met harde werk en volharding kan bereik, en nie op dit wat buite haar bereik is nie. Solange het haar Herve. Rosie sal haar Arik hê. Marta sal haar vryheid hê.

Sy kan die Here dank dat sy nooit weer onder haar pa se dak hoef te lewe nie. Sy sal nooit weer die blou kolle van slae hê nie. Sy sal nooit weer hoef te sit en luister as ’n man vir haar sê dat sy lelik, humeurig en selfsugtig is nie.

“*Vlieg,*” het Mamma gesê. “*Wees soos ’n arend.*” Met daardie woorde het Mamma te kenne gegee dat Marta nie die voorreg van ’n man en kinders sal geniet nie. “*’n Arend vlieg alleen.*”

Toe sy aan die slaap raak, verbeel Marta sy hoor ’n stem. “Mamma?” Sy droom van Mamma wat bokant haar vlieg, haar gesig stralend, haar uitgestrekte arms soos engelvlerke. Elise staan onder haar, haar hande uitgesteek. Die sneeu warrel rondom haar totdat sy verdwyn.

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Vir die volgende paar weke werk Marta sulke lang ure dat sy nie tyd het om aan enigiets buiten haar pligte en verantwoordelikhede te dink nie. Herve het nog ’n bediende, Edmee, aangestel om die huishoudelike take oor te neem. Marta berei al die etes vir die Fourniers en die 12 loseerders en versorg Solange gedurende die eerste weke van haar herstel. Baba Jean blyk al sy ma se tyd in beslag te neem. Na die eerste paar dae gaan slaap Herve in die sitkamer.

Een middag verskyn Herve in die kombuis. “Twee briewe, Marta!” Hy sit hulle op die werktafel. “Mmm, *ragoût de boeuf.*” Hy lig die pot met die pruttende beesvleisbredie se deksel op en adem die geur in terwyl Marta die brood uit die oond haal en op die tafel sit om af te koel. Sy neem die twee briewe, die een van Elise, die ander van Felda Braun.

Dit is met ’n gevoel van onheil dat Marta ’n kerfmes neem en albei oopskeur. Sy voel iets in Elise se koevert en vou die brief versigtig

oop. Mamma se goue oorbelle is binnekant.

*Mamma het hulle vir my gegee voordat sy dood is. Ek is lief vir jou, Marta. Ek het God gevra om my te vergewe. Ek hoop jy sal ook.*
*Elise*

Marta gaan sit swaar op die stoel.

"*Est quelque chose de mal*?" Herve staan na haar en kyk.

Wat is fout? Marta onthou die droom en die seer stok in haar keel. Sy vou die oorbelle met bewende hande in die briefie toe en bêre dit in die koevert. Nadat sy dit in haar sak gesteek het, maak sy Felda Braun se brief oop.

*Liewe Marta*
*Dit is met groot hartseer dat ek hierdie brief skryf ...*

"Mademoiselle?"

Marta kan nie deur haar trane sien nie. Terwyl sy besig was om Solange te help om haar baba in die wêreld te bring, was haar ma besig om dood te gaan. Sy laat sak Felda se brief en druk haar gesig in haar hande. "*Ma mère est morte*."

Herve praat in 'n sagte stem. Sy verstaan nie 'n woord wat hy sê nie. Hy loop rondom die tafel en sit sy hand op haar skouer. "Ek moes huis toe gegaan het." Marta wieg vorentoe en agtertoe en snik gesmoord in haar voorskoot. Herve gee haar skouer 'n sagte drukke en dan laat hy haar alleen. "Ek's jammer, Mamma. O, God, ek's so jammer." Sy bewe toe sy Felda Braun se brief optel. Dit bevat waarskynlik verdere besonderhede van haar ma se dood en Elise se trek na Grindelwald.

*Jou ma het 'n paar maande gelede vir my oor haar siekte geskryf en gevra of ek dit sou oorweeg om Elise by my in te neem wanneer sy nie meer daar is nie. Ek het dadelik Steffisburg toe gegaan om self met haar te praat. Ek het Anna skaars herken. Die dokter het haar eie vermoede dat sy tering het, bevestig. Sy wou nie gehad het jy moes weet dat sy sterwend was nie, want sy het geweet jy sou huis toe kom. Sy het gesê dat jou pa jou dan nooit weer sou laat gaan nie. Sy het gesê die predikant sou vir my skryf wanneer dit tyd was om Elise te kom haal.*

*Toe ek huis toe is, het ek vir haar koms begin regmaak. Ek het my vriende van jou ma se siekte vertel en hoe jou suster haar man in 'n tragiese ongeluk verloor het. Op hierdie manier kon ek Elise gerusstel dat sy haar baba sonder die vrees van 'n skandaal kan grootmaak.*

Marta word yskoud. *Haar baba*? Sy lees vinniger.

*Toe ek van die predikant hoor, het ek dadelik Steffisburg toe gegaan, maar Elise het reeds verdwyn. Jou pa het gedink hy sou haar in Thun opspoor. Almal het na haar gesoek, maar dit spyt my om vir jou te sê dat ons haar nie betyds opgespoor het nie. Jou vriendin Rosie het haar liggaam by 'n stroompie 'n ent van die huis af gekry.*

Marta huil totdat sy siek voel. Sy kry genoeg beheer oor haar emosies om tafel te dek en die aandete te bedien. Herve het die mans klaarblyklik van haar ma vertel, want hulle betuig hulle simpatie en praat in gedempte stemme. Marta sê niks van Elise nie. Edmee bly om skottelgoed te was en die kombuis skoon te maak. Sy dring daarop aan dat Marta na haar solderkamer toe moet gaan en probeer rus kry. Marta lê in 'n bondeltjie op haar sy en huil by die herinnering aan haar droom van Elise wat in die sneeu staan.

'n Paar dae later kry Marta 'n telegram van haar pa.

*Kom dadelik terug. Jou nodig in winkel.*

Trane van woede brand in haar oë. Sy bewe van ontsteltenis. Nie 'n enkele woord oor Mamma of Elise nie. Sy frommel die boodskap op, gooi dit in die stoof en kyk hoe dit brand.

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Solange sit by Marta in die kombuis terwyl Jean in 'n mandjie op die werktafel lê en slaap. "*Je comprends*." Sy neem Marta se hand. "God het jou na ons toe gebring toe ons jou die nodigste gehad het, en nou moet jy gaan. *C'est la vie, n'est-ce pas*?"

Marta voel 'n bietjie skuldig oor haar weggaan. Solange het vinnig herstel en is gretig om haar verpligtinge weer op te neem. Edmee het ingestem om voltyds aan te bly. Nes Marta is sy 'n harde werker, en sy sal met die baba help wanneer Solange met die kos besig is.

Solange tel die baba uit sy warm nessie. "Wil jy Jean nog een maal vashou voordat jy weggaan?"

"Ja, asseblief." Marta koester hom teen haar bors, en vir 'n oomblik verbeel sy haar dat hy aan haar behoort. Sy sing 'n Duitse wiegelied terwyl sy in die kombuis rondloop. Dan gee sy Jean weer vir sy ma. "*Danke*."

Trane loop oor Solange se wange. "Skryf vir ons, Marta. Ek en Herve wil weet wat van jou word."

Marta knik, nie in staat om te praat nie. Toe sy in die gang kom,

staan Herve en die ander mans en wag. Elkeen wens haar die beste toe terwyl sy verby hulle loop. By die deur gee Herve haar ’n broederlike soen op albei wange en hou ’n koevert na haar toe uit. “’n Geskenk van almal van ons.”

Sy kyk van hom na die ander mans. Sy pers haar lippe opmekaar om te keer dat sy huil, maak ’n diep kniebuiging en verlaat die huis. Wanhoop oorweldig haar toe sy na die stasie toe loop. Sy kyk op na die vertrektye. ’n Pligsgetroue dogter sou na Steffisburg toe teruggaan, sonder om te kla in die winkel werk en haar pa op sy oudag versorg. *Eer jou vader en jou moeder*, het God beveel, *dat jou dae verleng mag word in die land wat die Here jou God jou sal gee*.

Marta neem ’n koets na Lausanne waar sy ’n treinkaartjie Parys toe koop.

## Chapter 8

**1906**

Bern had invigorated Marta, but Paris overwhelmed her. She found her way to the Swiss Consulate. “I’m afraid no positions are open this week, Fräulein.” The clerk gave her directions to an inexpensive boardinghouse in the crowded streets of the *Rive Droite*. She paid for a week’s lodgings.

Early each morning, Marta went back to the consulate and then out to spend the day exploring the city and practicing her French. She asked directions and visited palaces and museums. She walked into evening along the Seine, lost among the crowds out enjoying the city of lights. She went to the *Musée du Louvre* and wandered through the *Jardin des Tuileries*. She sat in *Notre Dame* cathedral and prayed for her sister’s soul.

Prayers did not ease the grief consuming her.

Mama whispered in her dreams. *“Fly, Marta. Don’t be afraid,* mein kleiner Adler. . . .*”* And Marta would awaken, weeping. She dreamed of Elise, too, disturbing dreams of her sister lost and trying to find her way home. Marta could hear the echo of her voice. *“Marta, where are you? Marta, help me!”* she cried out, as the swirling snow enfolded her.

After seven days, Marta gave up on finding a position in Paris and bought a coach ticket to Calais. She boarded a boat across the English Channel and spent most of the trip leaning over the side.

* * *

Rain came down in sheets over Dover. Weary, Marta continued by coach to Canterbury, part of her wishing she had traveled southeast to the warmth of Italy rather than come to England. She consoled herself that learning English would bring her closer to her goal. After one night in cheap lodgings, Marta took another coach to London.

By the time she arrived, her wool coat smelled like a wet sheep, her boots and the hem of her serviceable skirt felt like they were caked with ten pounds of mud, and she had a head cold. Stomping her feet, she tried to loosen the mud from her boots before going inside the Swiss Consulate to look for lodgings and work.

“Add your name to the list and fill out this form.” The harried clerk slid a paper across his desk and went back to another pile of papers.

Ten girls had already written their names on the list. Marta added hers to the bottom and filled out the form carefully. The clerk looked it over. "You have a good hand, Fräulein. Do you speak English?"

"I've come to learn."

"Do you plan to return to Switzerland?"

She didn't know. "Eventually."

"Too many of our young people are going to America. The land of opportunity, they call it."

"I miss the snow. I miss the mountains."

"*Ja.* The air is not so clean here." He continued reading her form. "Ah! You worked with Warner Brennholtz at the *Hotel Germania*!" He smiled and nodded as he pulled his wire-rimmed glasses down. "I spent a week in Interlaken three years ago. Best food I've ever eaten."

"Chef Brennholtz trained me."

"Why did you leave?"

"To learn French. I'm here to learn English. There are more opportunities for employment for those who can speak multiple languages."

"Very true. Do you speak French?"

She gave a prim nod. *"Assez de servir."* Enough to serve, but little more.

"You've accomplished much for one so young, Fräulein Schneider." He glanced over her form again. "Dressmaking, graduate of *Haushaltungsschule Bern*, trained by Frau Fischer and Warner Brennholtz, delivered a baby, and managed a boardinghouse in Montreux . . ."

"I am a long way from accomplishing what I want, Herr Reinhard."

Herr Reinhard put her form on the top of the pile. "I will see what I can do."

Marta moved into the Swiss Home for Girls and waited. She had spent more than she intended seeing Paris. While other girls came and went, Marta kept to the house, trying to shake the head cold she had contracted on the journey to London and helping the housemother, Frau Alger, keep the common rooms clean and neat. She wondered if she had made a mistake in coming to England. The drizzling rain and heavy, soot-scented mists of London depressed her, and Frau Alger said good jobs were scarce.

A message came from the consulate, signed by Kurt Reinhard.

The wife of the Swiss consul needed an assistant cook for a dinner party that evening. Marta washed and put on her uniform, packed quickly, and headed to the consul's mansion by taxi.

She went to the servants' entrance and found herself greeted by a harried maid. "Thank goodness!" She waved Marta inside. "Frau Schmitz is frantic. She has twenty guests arriving for dinner in less than two hours, and Chef Adalrik's wife became ill this afternoon and had to be taken to the hospital. Another maid quit this morning. We have only one upstairs maid and me."

After the cold, damp air outside, the heat of the kitchen felt momentarily wonderful. The familiar smell of good Germanic cooking reminded her of the *Germania Hotel* and Warner Brennholtz. Other things struck her as well, but she decided it was better to be in a smoky, windowless kitchen than out in the damp looking for work. She set her suitcase aside and removed her coat as the maid introduced her to the grim-faced, gray-haired chef. Adalrik Kohler barely glanced at her. "Go with Wilda. Help her set the table for twenty."

"How many courses?"

"Four. Frau Schmitz wanted six, but I can't manage more without my wife. When you finish, come back to the kitchen. Oh, and, Fräulein, this is not a permanent position. As soon as Nadine recovers, you will go."

"I came to learn English. It is more likely I can accomplish that in an English household."

"Good. Then you will not be disappointed."

With Wilda's help, Marta covered the table with white damask and set out the Royal Albert Regency Blue dishes with crystal stemware and silverware. Two silver candelabras and an arrangement of purple and white lilacs adorned the center of the table. Marta folded the white napkins into peacock tails and set them in the middle of each plate. Frau Schmitz, a dazzling blonde woman in her forties, came in dressed in a blue satin gown. Diamonds sparkled at her throat as she walked around the table, inspecting each setting. "It will do." Marta gave a quick curtsy and headed for the kitchen.

By the end of the evening, Marta's legs ached from going up and down the stairs from the basement to the second-floor dining room. When the guests left and the kitchen had been cleaned from top to bottom, Wilda took her upstairs to the fourth-floor maids' quarters.

Over the next week, Marta worked in the smoky, airless kitchen

and carried breakfast trays to Frau Schmitz in her third-floor bedroom. She carried trays to the day nursery and served the nanny and the three polite, but rambunctious, Schmitz children. She carried trays laden with crumpets, cucumber sandwiches, and tea cakes to the second-floor parlor, where the lady of the house liked to have high tea using her Royal Albert Regency Blue dishes and silver tea service. She carried more trays into the dining room each evening when Herr Schmitz came home for dinner with his wife, and more trays up to the children's dining room on the third floor, where the nanny presided.

Nadine returned, and despite Frau Schmitz's complaints about money, Adalrik insisted Marta remain in her employ or he would leave. "Nadine is not fully recovered. She hasn't the stamina to go up and down the stairs twenty times a day. Marta is younger and stronger. She can manage."

After a month, Marta caught another cold, which sank into her chest. By the end of each day, her legs ached so much she could barely drag herself up the four flights to the cold room she shared with Wilda. Collapsing into bed, she dreamed of stairs winding up like Jacob's ladder to heaven. Flights of stairs angled to the right and left, until they disappeared in the clouds. Even after a night of sleep, Marta awakened feeling drained.

"Your cough is getting worse." Nadine poured hot water and brewed tea with lemon. "This will make you feel better."

Adalrik looked grim. "See a doctor before you get any worse. You don't want to end up in the hospital the way Nadine did."

Marta had no illusions. Adalrik wasn't concerned about her health, but about whether Nadine would have to return to upstairs duties. "A doctor will only tell me to rest and drink plenty of fluids."

Nadine made certain she had plenty of broth and tea with milk, but rest proved elusive and the chest cold grew worse.

"She's ringing again," Adalrik told Marta. An evening soiree had lasted far into the night, and Marta had been on duty until the last guest left and everything had been washed and put away. "She'll want her breakfast served in bed."

Marta prepared Frau Schmitz's tray. She managed to climb the first flight of stairs before a fit of coughing gripped her. She set the tray down heavily and coughed until the spasm passed. Lifting the tray, she climbed the rest of the stairs.

"This breakfast is cold." Frau Schmitz waved her hand. "Take it away and bring me another tray. And be quicker next time."

Marta made it halfway down the first flight of stairs when she began to cough again. Struggling for breath, Marta sank onto a step, the tray on her lap. Frau Schmitz came out and peered down the stairwell and disappeared back into her room. A moment later, Nadine went up the stairs. Marta managed to stand and make it downstairs to the kitchen.

Nadine came in right after her. She gave Marta a pitying look. "I'm sorry, Marta, but Frau Schmitz says you must go."

"Go?"

"She wants you out of the house. Today."

"Why?"

"She's afraid of contamination. She says she doesn't want her children getting croup."

Marta gave a bleak laugh. Oddly, she felt relieved. Another trip up those stairs and she would have come tumbling down. "I'll go as soon as I receive my pay. And would you ask Wilda to collect my things please? I don't think I can walk up those stairs again." Chest hurting, she coughed violently into her apron.

When Nadine left, Adalrik put the back of his hand against Marta's forehead. "You're burning up."

"I just need rest."

"Frau Schmitz is afraid you're consumptive."

Marta felt the shock of alarm. Was she destined to die like Mama? Nothing Dr. Zimmer had done had prevented Mama from drowning in her own blood.

"Do you know of a good doctor who speaks German?"

* * *

A nurse helped Marta dress after the examination and showed her into Dr. Smythe's office. He rose when Marta entered and told her to sit. "I've seen this often before, Fräulein. Swiss girls are used to good, clean mountain air, not heavy smoke and damp fog. You should go back to Switzerland. Go home to your family and rest."

Fighting tears, Marta imagined how her father would greet her. "I'll get more rest in England." If Papa's heart had not softened over Mama's illness, he certainly would show her no kindness. She coughed into her handkerchief, thankful when she didn't see spots of red against the white. "What I need is work in a smaller house with fewer stairs and a kitchen with a door or window." The pain built in her chest until she couldn't hold back another cough. When the spasm eased, she raised her head.

"Rest is what you need, not work."

Gathering her courage, she looked him in the face. "Do I have consumption?"

"You are as pale and thin as a consumptive, but no. Frankly, Fräulein, if you don't take better care of yourself, this can kill you quicker than consumption. Do you understand me?"

Disheartened, Marta relented. "How much rest do I need?"

"A month at the least."

"A month?"

"Six weeks would be preferable."

"Six weeks?" Marta coughed until she felt light-headed.

The doctor gave her a bottle of elixir and ordered her to take a spoonful every four hours. "Rest is the best cure, Fräulein. Your body can't fight infection when exhausted."

Sick and depressed, Marta went back to the Swiss Home for Girls. Frau Alger took one look at her and assigned her a bed in a quiet corner of a street-level dorm room. Too tired to undress, Marta flopped down onto the cot, her coat still on.

Frau Alger came with a pitcher of warm water and a bowl. "That won't do."

Marta shivered as the woman helped her undress and put on her nightgown. She felt an unbearable longing for Mama. When she burst into tears, Frau Alger helped her get into bed. She took the bottle of elixir and read the directions. She went for a spoon and gave Marta her first dose of laudanum, then covered her with thick blankets and tucked them snugly around her. She put her hand on Marta's head. *"Schlaf, Kind."* Marta whispered a bleak thank-you. Already, her eyelids grew heavy.

She awakened at Frau Alger's touch. "Drink." She helped Marta sit up enough to drink a cup of thick soup, take another dose of medicine, and sink back into bed. She dreamed of climbing stairs up and up, flights turning right and left and disappearing into the clouds. She held a heavy tray balanced on her shoulder, then paused to rest. Her legs ached so terribly, she knew she would never make it to heaven. "I can't do it."

*"Yes, you can."* Mama stood above her dressed in white. *"Don't give up,* Liebling*."*

She awakened to the sound of church bells and fell asleep again, dreaming Mama held her hand as they walked up the road to St. Stephen's Church. Rosie called out to her, and Marta found herself in

the Alpine meadow above Steffisburg, picking spring flowers with Rosie.

Rain battered the windows, awakening her briefly. Shivering, Marta pulled the blankets up again. She wanted to dream of Mama and Rosie, but instead dreamed of being lost in the snow. She heard Elise crying out her name over and over. Marta tried to run to her, but her feet kept sinking into the snow. Crawling on her hands and knees, she looked down at the rushing water of the Zulg and saw Elise lying asleep, a baby in her arms, and a blanket of snow covering them both. "No." She moaned. "No. No." Frau Alger put cool cloths on her brow and spoke to her. Mama sat in the graveyard, embroidering another dress. She looked up with sunken eyes. *"Don't come back, Marta. Fly,* Liebling. *Fly away and live."*

Marta awakened to the sound of coach wheels rolling by. She cried, afraid if she went back to sleep, she would dream again. She heard girls come and go, and she pretended to be asleep. Frau Alger came in with a tray. "You're awake." She set the tray aside and put a hand on Marta's forehead. "Good. Your fever has broken." She helped Marta sit up.

"I'm sorry to be so much trouble." Marta felt the tears come and couldn't stop them.

Frau Alger patted her shoulder. "Hush now, Marta. You're no trouble. And you will be well soon. It's hard to be so far from home, *ja*?"

Marta covered her face, feeling the loss of Mama and Elise more acutely than ever. "I have no home."

Frau Alger sat on the bed and gathered Marta close, murmuring to her as she would a hurting child. Giving in to her grief, Marta clung to her, pretending for just for a moment this kind, older woman was Mama.

* * *

After a week in bed, Marta felt able to get up. The house was empty, so she fixed herself a bowl of hot porridge. Why had she come to England? She felt lost and at odds with herself. Perhaps she should have stayed in Steffisburg and helped Mama. She could have watched over Elise. Too late now to think about those things. What sort of future would she have now if she obeyed Papa and went back? Mama had known. Mama had warned her to stay away.

She gathered her courage and wrote to Rosie.

*I am in England. Papa sent a wire telling me to come home. He said*

*nothing about either Elise or Mama, and I knew he would expect me to spend the rest of my life in the shop. If I had not received a letter from Mama's cousin, Felda Braun, I would not have known Elise had died.*

*I fled, Rosie. I will never return to Steffisburg. The last time I saw Mama, she said I had to go. In truth, I would rather die a stranger in a foreign land than spend another day under my father's roof.*

*Cousin Felda said it was you who found Elise. I dream of her every night. She cries out to me and disappears before I can reach her. I pray God forgives me for being such a poor sister. I pray God will forgive her for what she did to herself and her child. And I pray you will forgive us, too. I will be forever in your debt.*

*Marta*

* * *

After another week of convalescence, Marta grew restless and discontented. Mama had told her to fly, not perch inside the walls of the Swiss Home for Girls. Rest, the doctor had said, but rest wasn't just lying in bed tucked beneath a mound of covers. Marta leaned her forehead against the glass, feeling the walls of her prison close in around her. She imagined what Mama would say if she stood in the room right now.

*"God is my strength, Marta. He is my help in times of trouble. . . . God has a plan for your life. . . . Perhaps it is God who has put this dream in your heart. . . . God is the one driving you away. . . . An eagle flies alone. . . ."*

She thought of Elise, too. Mama's little barn swallow spoke to her. *"I gave in to despair, Marta. If you give up, you're giving in, too."*

Marta dressed and buttoned up her wool coat.

Frau Alger intercepted her at the front door. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out for a walk."

Each day, determined to regain her strength, Marta went a little farther, pushed herself a little harder. At first, she could barely walk more than a block without finding a place to sit and rest. Gradually, she went two, then three. She found a small park and sat surrounded by trees and grass, spring flowers beginning to emerge, slivers of sunlight slicing through the clouds. Sometimes she rose and stood in a spear of light, closing her eyes and imagining she stood in the Alpine meadow with Mama or Rosie.

Soon, she could walk a mile before exhausting herself. When it rained one day, she sought warmth and rest in the Hare and Toad pub. Three men sat drinking from mugs of beer, giving her a cursory glance as she found her way to an empty table in a dimly lit corner. Though she felt out of place and uncomfortable, she decided to stay. At least here, she would hear English spoken.

The men talked in low voices and then, forgetting her presence, spoke more naturally. When another entered, the three greeted him and made room. He spoke to the proprietor, handed over some coins, and took a mug of ale to the table. A few minutes later, the burly proprietor came out with meals stacked up his arm—fish, judging by the smell, and cooked in some sort of dough. She listened, trying to pick up words. Some sounded familiar, no doubt derived from German.

Gathering her courage, Marta went to the counter and tried to make sense of the English words written on the menu overhead. She understood the prices well enough. The proprietor stood behind the counter, drying a beer mug. Pointing to the menu, Marta took out a few pence from her pocket and lined them up on the counter. She put her palms together and moved her hands like a fish.

"Fish and chips?"

"Fish and chips," she repeated. *"Danke."*

He brought her meal and a glass of water. He took a bottle of malt vinegar from another table and set it in front of her. "For the fish." He pointed.

Marta ate slowly, experimentally, not sure her stomach could stand deep-fried fish caked in dough. Others came in over the next hour, and the pub began to fill with men and women. Some had children. Marta felt self-conscious taking up a table by herself and left. The sun had gone down and the mist had turned to rain. It took an hour to walk back to the Swiss Home for Girls.

"Look at you, Marta!" Frau Alger shook her head. "Do you want to catch your death this time?" She made her sit by the stove and drink hot tea. "Here. I have a letter for you."

Heart pounding, Marta tore Rosie's letter open.

*My dearest friend,*

*I feared you would blame me for not keeping better watch over Elise. I went to see her the day after your mother's funeral. I should not have waited. Had I gone right after the services, Elise might still be alive. But I did wait and will forever be sorry for it. My mother went*

*with me.*

*Your father said he didn't know where Elise had gone. He said she would not come out of her room on the day of the funeral. He didn't look in on her until the next. Your father went out to call the alarm.*

*I remembered how Elise loved to sit by the stream and listen to the living water. When I found her, she looked like an angel asleep beneath a white blanket of eiderdown.*

*I don't know how much Felda Braun told you, but I discovered why Elise hid herself away. She was heavy with child. May God have mercy on the Meyer men for what they did to your poor sister.*

*I found Elise curled up on her side, as though to embrace the baby inside her and keep it warm. My father told me people who freeze to death feel no pain. I pray that is true.*

*You asked me to forgive you. I ask now for your forgiveness. Please do not stop writing. I love you like you are my own sister. I miss you desperately.*

*Ever your friend,*

*Rosie*

Marta wrote back and asked where Papa had buried Elise. She wept at the thought of Elise buried somewhere other than beside Mama, but she knew the church would not want a suicide laid to rest in consecrated soil.

Marta bundled up the next morning, walked to a coach stand, and rode down to Westminster Abbey. She sat on a pew, wondering what Mama would think of this magnificent coronation church. Massive gray columns rose like enormous tree trunks holding up a shadowed canopy above. A rainbow of color splashed across the marble mosaic floors, as sun shone through the stained-glass windows. But the light quickly faded. She listened to the living walking among the shrines to the dead, standing and whispering in the naves lined with crypts holding the bones of great poets and politicians, or gazing at some bronze effigy tomb or sarcophagus.

*Oh, God, where does my sister sleep? Can You show mercy and carry her home to heaven? Or must she suffer the agonies of hell because she lost hope?*

A woman touched Marta on the shoulder and spoke. Startled, Marta wiped tears away quickly. The woman spoke to her in English. Though unable to comprehend the words, Marta took comfort in the woman's gentle smile and tone. Mama might have comforted a

stranger in the same way.

Marta went to Hyde Park the next day and sat on the grass, watching the boats drift by on the blue Serpentine. Even in the open air and sunshine, Marta felt grief weigh down upon her. Mama said God offered her a future and a hope. But what did that mean? Was she supposed to wait until God spoke to her from the heavens? *"Go,"* Mama had said, but Marta didn't know where to go anymore.

She only knew she couldn't continue this way, drowning in sorrow and living with regret. She had to remember what had driven her away from home in the first place. She wanted freedom to become all she could be. She wanted something to call her own. She couldn't have either of those things by sitting and feeling sorry for herself.

Before heading back to the Swiss Home for Girls, Marta went to the Swiss consul's offices.

"Fräulein Schneider!" Kurt Reinhard greeted her warmly. "It is good to see you. I heard you left the consul's house."

Surprised he remembered her at all, Marta told him what had transpired. "I would like to put my name on your list again, Herr Reinhard. But may I request an English household this time, preferably one away from the soot and smoke of London?"

"Of course. How soon will you be able to work?"

"The sooner the better."

"Then I think I have just the place for you."

## Hoofstuk 8

## 1906

In Bern het Marta gevoel sy lewe, maar Parys oorweldig haar. Sy gaan eerste na die Switserse konsulaat. "Ons het ongelukkig op die oomblik nie enige beskikbare poste nie, Fräulein." Die klerk gee vir haar aanwysings na 'n goedkoop losieshuis in die besige strate van die *Rive Droite*. Sy betaal vir 'n week se verblyf.

Marta gaan elke oggend terug konsulaat toe, en die res van die dag verken sy die stad en oefen haar Frans. Sy vra aanwysings en besoek paleise en museums. Sy loop tot vroegaand langs die Seine, verlore tussen die mense wat die stad van ligte geniet. Sy gaan na die *Louvre* en dwaal deur die *Jardin des Tuileries*. Sy gaan sit in die *Notre Dame*-katedraal en bid vir haar sussie se siel.

Haar gebede verlig egter nie die verterende smart nie.

Mamma fluister in haar drome. "*Vlieg, Marta. Moenie bang wees nie,* mein kleiner Adler ... " Marta word huilend wakker. Sy droom ook van Elise, ontstellende drome van haar sussie wat verdwaal het en by die huis probeer uitkom. Marta hoor haar stem eggo. "*Marta, waar is jy? Marta, help my!*" roep sy terwyl die warrelende sneeu haar omvou.

Ná sewe dae besluit Marta sy gaan nie 'n werk in Parys kry nie en koop 'n koetskaartjie na Calais. Van daar af vaar sy oor die Engelse Kanaal en bring die grootste deel van die rit deur oor die reling.

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Die reën kom in vlae oor Dover. Van daar af neem Marta 'n koets na Canterbury. Sy wens 'n bietjie sy het eerder suidoos na die warmte van Italië gereis het as om Engeland toe te kom. Sy troos haarself dat as sy Engels kan praat, sy nader aan haar doel sal wees. Na een nag in 'n goedkoop kamer neem Marta 'n volgende koets Londen toe.

Teen die tyd dat sy daar aankom, ruik haar woljas soos 'n nat skaap,

voel dit of haar stewels en soom van haar dienlike rok vyf kilogram modder met hulle saamsleep en het sy 'n kopverkoue. Sy stamp haar voete in 'n poging om van die modder ontslae te raak voordat sy by die Switserse konsulaat ingaan om werk en verblyf te soek.

"Skryf jou naam onderaan die lys en vul hierdie vorm in." Die oorwerkte klerk skuif 'n papier oor sy lessenaar en wend hom tot 'n ander stapel papiere.

Daar is alreeds tien meisies se name op die lys. Nadat Marta hare onderaan geskryf het, begin sy die vorm noukeurig invul. Die klerk gaan dit na. "Jy het 'n netjiese handskrif, Fräulein. Praat jy Engels?"

"Ek het gekom om te leer."

"Is jy van plan om na Switserland toe terug te keer?"

Sy weet nie. "Eendag."

"Daar is te veel van ons jongmense wat Amerika toe gaan. Omdat daar soveel geleenthede is, sê hulle."

"Ek mis die sneeu. Ek mis die berge."

"Ja. Die lug daar is ook nie so skoon nie." Hy lees verder. "Aa! Jy het saam met Warner Brennholtz by die *Hotel Germania* gewerk!" Hy glimlag en knik toe hy sy brilletjie afhaal. "Drie jaar gelede was ek vir 'n week in Interlaken. Die beste kos wat ek ooit geëet het."

"Chef Brennholtz het my geleer."

"Hoekom is jy daar weg?"

"Om Frans te leer. Ek is hier om Engels te leer. Daar is meer werksgeleenthede vir mense wat verskillende tale kan praat."

"Baie waar. Praat jy Frans?"

Sy knik styf. "*Assez de servir*." Ten minste genoeg om te bedien.

"Jy het al baie bereik vir iemand van jou ouderdom, Fräulein Schneider." Hy kyk weer na die vorm. "Kleremakery, 'n sertifikaat van *Haushaltungsschule Bern*, opleiding deur Frau Fischer en Warner Brennholtz, 'n baba in die lewe help bring, 'n losieshuis in Montreux bestuur ... "

"Daar is nog baie wat moet gebeur voordat ek alles bereik wat ek my ten doel gestel het, Herr Reinhard."

Herr Reinhard plaas haar vorm bo-op die stapel. "Ek sal kyk wat ek kan doen."

Marta gaan bly in die Switserse Tehuis vir Meisies en wag. Sy het meer geld in Parys uitgegee as wat sy beoog het. Terwyl die ander meisies kom en gaan, bly Marta in die huis om die verkoue af te skud wat sy op pad na Londen gekry het en om die huismoeder, Frau Alger, te help om die kamers skoon en netjies te hou. Sy wonder of sy 'n fout

gemaak het om Londen toe te kom. Die aanhoudende reën en swaar, roetagtige mis van Londen maak haar neerslagtig, en Frau Alger sê dat goeie werk skaars is.

Dan kom daar ’n boodskap van die konsulaat, geteken deur Kurt Reinhard. Die vrou van die Switserse konsul soek ’n assistentkok vir ’n dinee die aand. Marta was en trek haar HB-uniform aan, pak haastig en neem ’n taxi na die konsul se herehuis.

Sy gaan klop aan die agterdeur en word deur ’n oorstuurde bediende ontvang. “Dank Vader!” Sy wys Marta moet inkom. “Frau Schmitz is in ’n toestand. Sy verwag 20 gaste oor minder as twee ure en sjef Adalrik se vrou het vanmiddag siek geword en moes in die hospitaal opgeneem word. Een van die ander bediendes het vanoggend bedank. Ons het net een huisbediende en ek.”

Na die koue, klam lug buitekant is die hitte in die kombuis vir ’n paar oomblikke ’n lafenis. Die bekende geur van goeie Duitse kos herinner haar aan die *Germania Hotel* en Warner Brennholtz. Daar is ander minder aangename goed wat haar ook tref, maar sy besluit dis beter om in ’n rokerige, vensterlose kombuis te wees as om buite in die nattigheid na werk te soek. Sy sit haar tas neer en trek haar jas uit terwyl die bediende haar aan die stroewe, gryskop sjef voorstel. Adalrik Kohler kyk skaars in haar rigting. “Gaan saam met Wilda. Help haar om 20 plekke te dek.”

“Hoeveel gange?”

“Vier. Frau Schmitz wou ses hê, maar sonder my vrou kan ek nie soveel hanteer nie. As jy klaar is, kom kombuis toe. O, en, Fräulein, dit is nie ’n permanente pos nie. Sodra Nadine gesond is, sal jy moet gaan.”

“Ek het gekom om Engels te leer. Daar is ’n groter kans dat ek dit in ’n Engelse huis sal doen.”

“Mooi. Dan sal jy nie teleurgesteld wees nie.”

Met Wilda se hulp dek Marta die tafel met ’n wit damastafeldoek en blou Royal Albert-borde met kristalglase en silwerware. Twee silwerkandelare en ’n rangskikking pers en wit lelies pryk in die middel van die tafel. Marta vou die wit servette in pousterte en plaas hulle in die middel van elke bord. Frau Schmitz, ’n stralende blonde vrou in die veertig, verskyn in ’n blou satynrok. ’n String diamante skitter teen haar keel toe sy om die tafel loop en elke plasing inspekteer. “Dit sal deug.” Marta kniebuig vinnig voordat sy kombuis toe verdwyn.

Teen die einde van die aand pyn Marta se bene van die op- en

afloop tussen die kelder en die eetkamer op die tweede vloer. Toe die gaste weg is en die kombuis skitterskoon is, neem Wilda haar na die bediendekwartiere op die vierde vloer.

Vir die volgende week werk Marta in die rokerige, bedompige kombuis. Soggens neem sy Frau Schmitz se ontbyt na haar slaapkamer op die derde vloer. Sy dra skinkborde na die kinderkamer en bedien die kinderoppasster en die drie hoflike maar weerbarstige Schmitz-kinders. Sy dra skinkborde met plaatkoekies, komkommertoebroodjies en koek na die teekamer op die tweede vloer waar die dame van die huis graag met haar Royal Albert-Regency Blue-teestel en silwerteeservies teepartytjies hou. Saans neem sy skottels na die eetkamer wanneer Herr Schmitz tuiskom vir aandete saam met sy vrou, en nog skinkborde na die kinders se eetkamer op die derde vloer waar die kinderoppasster inwoon.

Nadine kom terug, en ten spyte van Frau Schmitz se klagtes oor die geld, dreig Adalrik om te bedank as sy Marta laat gaan. “Nadine is nog nie heeltemal gesond nie. Sy het nie die stamina om 20 keer ’n dag die trappe aan te durf nie. Marta is jonger en sterker. Sy kom goed reg.”

’n Maand later kry Marta weer verkoue en hierdie keer gaan sit dit in haar bors. Saans is haar bene so seer dat sy nouliks die krag het om haarself die vier stelle op te sleep na die kamer wat sy met Wilda deel. En wanneer sy op haar bed neerval, droom sy van trappe wat soos Jakob se leer tot in die hemel reik. Die trappe vertak na links en regs totdat hulle in die wolke verdwyn. Selfs na ’n nag se slaap, word Marta doodmoeg wakker.

“Jou hoes word erger.” Nadine skink vir haar ’n koppie kookwater en maak suurlemoentee. “Dit sal jou laat beter voel.”

Adalrik lyk stroef. “Gaan sien ’n dokter voordat jy sieker word. Jy wil nie ook in die hospitaal beland nie.”

Marta weet. Adalrik is nie eintlik besorgd oor haar gesondheid nie, maar oor die feit dat Nadine weer haar verpligtings bo in die huis sal moet hervat. “’n Dokter sal net sê dat ek moet rus en baie vloeistof inneem.”

Nadine sorg dat sy baie sop en tee met melk drink, maar ’n ruskans ontwyk haar en haar borsverkoue word erger.

“Ek hoor haar lui,” sê Adalrik vir Marta. ’n Partytjie het tot laatnag aangehou en Marta was aan diens totdat die laaste gas weg is en alles gewas en weggepak is. “Sy sal haar ontbyt in die bed wil hê.”

Marta berei Frau Schmitz se skinkbord. Sy slaag daarin om die eerste stel trappe te klim voordat ’n hoesbui haar oorweldig. Sy sit die

skinkbord hard neer en hoes totdat die spasma oor is. Dan tel sy die skinkbord op en klim die res van die trappe.

"Hierdie ontbyt is koud." Frau Schmitz maak 'n afwysende gebaar. "Vat dit weg en bring vir my kos wat warm is. En maak vinniger hierdie keer."

Op pad ondertoe, in die middel van die eerste stel trappe, begin Marta weer hoes. Sy sak benoud op 'n trap neer, sommer so met die skinkbord op haar skoot. Frau Schmitz kom uit en kyk van bo af na haar voordat sy na haar kamer verdwyn. 'n Oomblik later kom Nadine met die trappe op. Marta kry opgestaan en maak dit tot in die kombuis.

Nadine kom net ná haar in. Sy gee Marta 'n simpatieke kyk. "Ek's jammer, Marta, maar Frau Schmitz sê jy moet gaan."

"Gaan?"

"Sy wil jou uit die huis hê. Vandag nog."

"Hoekom?"

"Sy's bang hulle steek aan. Sy sê sy wil nie hê haar kinders moet kroep kry nie."

Marta gee 'n flou laggie. Vreemd genoeg voel sy verlig. Nog 'n stel trappe en sy sou daar afgeval het. "Ek sal gaan sodra ek my geld kry. En sal jy Wilda vra om my goed te gaan haal, asseblief. Ek dink nie ek sal daardie trappe weer tot bo maak nie." Haar bors brand toe sy onbedaarlik in haar voorskoot hoes.

Toe Nadine uit is, voel Adalrik met die agterkant van sy hand aan haar voorkop. "Jy is vuurwarm."

"Ek het net rus nodig."

"Frau Schmitz is bang jy het tering."

Marta skrik. Is sy bestem om soos Mamma te sterf? Niks wat dokter Zimmer gedoen het, het voorkom dat Mamma in haar eie bloed verdrink het nie.

"Weet jy van 'n goeie dokter wat Duits praat?"

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Ná die ondersoek help 'n verpleegster Marta aantrek en neem haar deur na dokter Smythe se spreekkamer. Hy staan op toe Marta inkom en wys dat sy moet sit. "Ek het dit al dikwels gesien, Fräulein. Switserse meisies is gewoond aan goeie, skoon berglug, nie swaar rook en klam mis nie. Jy moet teruggaan Switserland toe. Gaan huis toe en

rus."

Marta sluk haar trane terug as sy dink hoe haar pa haar sal ontvang. "Ek sal meer rus in Engeland kry." As Mamma se siekte nie Pappa se hart versag het nie, sal hy haar definitief nie goedgesind wees nie. Sy hoes in haar sakdoek, dankbaar dat daar nie rooi spikkels teen die wit is nie. "Wat ek nodig het, is werk in 'n kleiner huis met minder trappe en 'n kombuis met 'n deur of 'n venster." Die pyn in haar keel bou op totdat sy nie haar hoes kan terughou nie. Toe die bui oor is, kyk sy op.

"Jy moet rus, nie werk nie."

Sy skraap moed bymekaar en kyk hom in die oë. "Het ek tering?"

"Jy is so bleek en maer soos 'n teringlyer, maar nee. Maar, Fräulein, as jy nie beter na jouself kyk nie, kan hierdie ding jou vinniger as tering doodmaak. Verstaan jy my?"

Mismoedig gee sy toe. "Hoeveel rus het ek nodig?"

"Minstens 'n maand."

"'n Maand?"

"Ses weke sou beter wees."

"Ses weke?" Marta hoes totdat sy lighoofdig voel.

Die dokter gee vir haar 'n botteltjie medisyne en sê dat sy elke vier ure 'n lepel daarvan moet drink. "Rus is die beste medisyne, Fräulein. Jou liggaam kan nie teen die infeksie baklei as hy ooreis is nie."

Marta voel siek en neerslagtig toe sy na die Switserse Tehuis vir Meisies teruggaan. Frau Alger gee haar een kyk en stuur haar na 'n bed in 'n stil hoekie van 'n slaapsaal op straatvlak. Te moeg om uit te trek val Marta jas en al op die bed.

Frau Alger kom terug met 'n beker warm water en 'n skottel. "Dit sal nie deug nie."

Marta bewe terwyl die vrou haar help ontklee en haar nagrok aantrek. Sy ervaar 'n ondraaglike verlange na Mamma. Toe sy in trane uitbars, help Frau Alger haar in die bed. Sy neem die medisynebottel en lees die aanwysings. Sy gaan haal 'n lepel en gee Marta haar eerste dosis loudanum voordat sy die dik komberse oor haar trek en hulle knus om haar invou. Sy plaas haar hand op Marta se kop. "*Schlaf, Kind.*" Marta fluister 'n swak dankie, haar oë reeds besig om toe te val.

Sy word wakker toe Frau Alger aan haar raak. "Drink." Sy help Marta regop genoeg om 'n beker dik sop te drink en haar nog 'n lepel medisyne in te gee voordat sy weer teen haar kussing terugsak. Sy droom sy klim stelle en stelle trappe, van stelle wat na links en regs wentel en in die wolke verdwyn. Sy dra 'n swaar skinkbord op haar skouer, en gaan staan om te rus. Haar bene is so seer dat sy weet dat

sy nooit die hemel gaan haal nie. "Ek kan nie meer nie."

"*Ja, jy kan.*" Mamma staan bo haar in 'n wit kleed. "*Moenie opgee nie,* Liebling."

Sy skrik wakker van kerkklokke en raak weer aan die slaap. Sy droom sy en Mamma loop hand aan hand na die St. Stephen's-kerk. Rosie roep na haar en dan is Marta in die weiveld bokant Steffisburg besig om saam met Rosie blomme te pluk.

Sy word vlugtig wakker van reën teen die vensters. Marta ril en trek die komberse tot by haar ken. Sy wil van Mamma en Rosie droom, maar droom dat sy in die sneeu verdwaal. Sy hoor hoe Elise haar naam oor en oor roep. Marta probeer na haar toe hardloop, maar haar voete bly in die sneeu wegsak. Later kruip sy hande-viervoet totdat sy by die bruisende water van die Zulg kom en Elise daar sien lê en slaap. Sy hou 'n baba vas en hulle albei word deur 'n sneeukombers bedek. "Nee." Sy kreun. "Nee. Nee." Frau Alger sit koel waslappe op haar voorkop en praat met haar. Mamma sit in die begraafplaas, besig om nog 'n rok te borduur. Sy kyk met ingesonke oë na haar. "*Moenie terugkom nie, Marta. Vlieg,* Liebling. *Vlieg weg en lewe.*"

Die gerol van koetswiele maak haar wakker. Sy huil, bang dat as sy weer aan die slaap raak sy weer sal droom. Sy hoor die meisies kom en gaan, en sy maak of sy slaap. Frau Alger kom met 'n skinkbord in. "Jy's wakker." Sy sit die skinkbord neer en plaas 'n hand op Marta se voorkop. "Mooi. Jou koors het gebreek." Sy help Marta regop sit.

"Ek's jammer dat ek soveel moeite is." Marta se trane kom en sy kan hulle nie keer nie.

Frau Alger raak sag aan haar skouer. "Stil nou, Marta. Jy is nie moeite nie. En jy gaan binnekort weer gesond wees. Dis swaar om so ver van die huis af te wees, nie waar nie?"

Marta slaan haar hande oor haar gesig en die verlies van Mamma en Elise is intenser as ooit. "Ek het nie 'n huis nie."

Frau Alger kom sit op die bed en neem Marta in haar arms. Sy praat sag met haar soos met 'n kind wat seer het. Marta gee toe aan haar smart en verbeel haar net vir 'n oomblik dat hierdie goedhartige, ouer vrou Mamma is.

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Ná 'n week in die bed slaag Marta daarin om op te staan. Die huis is leeg; dus maak sy vir haar 'n bakkie warm pap. Hoekom het sy

Engeland toe gekom? Sy voel verlore en kwaad vir haarself. Dalk moes sy in Steffisburg gebly het en Mamma gehelp het. Sy kon na Elise gekyk het. Maar dis nou te laat om aan daardie dinge te dink. Watter soort toekoms sal sy nou hê as sy Pappa gehoorsaam en teruggaan? Mamma het geweet. Mamma het haar gewaarsku om weg te bly.

Sy skraap haar moed bymekaar en skryf vir Rosie.

> *Ek is in Engeland. Pappa het 'n telegram gestuur en gesê ek moet huis toe kom. Hy het niks oor Mamma of Elise gesê nie, en ek weet hy sal van my verwag om die res van my lewe in die winkel deur te bring. As ek nie 'n brief van Mamma se niggie, Felda Braun, gekry het nie, sou ek nie van Elise se dood geweet het nie.*
>
> *Ek het gevlug, Rosie. Ek sal nooit weer na Steffisburg toe teruggaan nie. Die laaste keer toe ek Mamma gesien het, het sy gesê ek moes gaan. Om die waarheid te sê, ek sal eerder alleen in 'n vreemde land sterf as om nog 'n dag onder my pa se dak te bly.*
>
> *Niggie Felda het gesê dis jy wat Elise gekry het. Ek droom elke nag van haar. Sy roep my en verdwyn voordat ek by haar kan kom. Ek bid dat die Here my sal vergewe omdat ek so 'n slegte suster was. Ek bid dat die Here haar vergewe vir dit wat sy aan haarself en haar baba gedoen het. En ek bid dat jy ons ook sal vergewe. Ek is so baie aan jou verskuldig.*
>
> *Marta*

***

Ná nog 'n week se herstel is Marta rusteloos en ongeduldig. Mamma het gesê sy moet vlieg, nie tussen die mure van die Switserse Tehuis vir Meisies sit nie. Rus, het die dokter gesê, maar rus beteken nie noodwendig dat jy in die bed onder 'n hoop komberse moet lê nie. Marta leun met haar voorkop teen die glas en voel hoe die mure van die tronk rondom haar inkrimp. Sy dink aan wat Mamma sou sê as sy nou by haar in die kamer was.

*"God is my krag, Marta. Hy is my hulp in tye van nood … God het 'n plan vir jou lewe … Dalk is dit die Here wat hierdie droom in jou hart gesit het … God is die een wat jou wegdryf … 'n Arend vlieg alleen."*

Sy dink ook aan Elise. Mamma se klein swaeltjie praat met haar. *"Ek het aan my wanhoop toegegee, Marta. As jy opgee, beteken dit jy gee ook toe."*

Marta trek aan en knoop haar woljas toe.

Frau Alger hou haar terug. “Waarnatoe dink jy gaan jy?”

“Ek moet net ’n entjie gaan stap.”

Vasbeslote om haar kragte te herwin, loop Marta elke dag ’n bietjie verder, druk sy haarself ’n bietjie harder. Aanvanklik kan sy kwalik meer as ’n blok loop voordat sy iewers ’n plek kry om te sit en rus. Mettertyd loop sy twee, dan drie. Sy ontdek ’n klein parkie en gaan sit tussen bome en gras. Die lenteblomme begin uitkom en die son steek sy vingers deur die wolke. Soms gaan staan sy in een van die ligbane, sluit haar oë en verbeel haar dat sy in die Alpeveld saam met Mamma of Rosie is.

Kort voor lank kan sy ’n kilometer en ’n half loop voordat sy moet rus. Toe dit eendag begin reën, neem sy haar toevlug tot die *Hare and Toad Pub*. Drie mans sit en bier drink en kyk vlugtig op toe sy na ’n leë tafel in ’n swak verligte hoek loop. Al voel sy ongemaklik en ontuis, besluit sy om te bly. Ten minste sal sy die mense Engels hoor praat.

Die mans praat in gedempte stemme en dan, asof hulle van haar vergeet, praat hulle meer natuurlik. Toe nog een inkom, groet hulle hom en maak plek. Hy praat met die eienaar, oorhandig ’n paar muntstukke en neem ’n bierbeker na die tafel toe. ’n Paar minute later verskyn die eienaar met borde kos op sy arm gebalanseer – vis, te oordeel na die geur, en in een of ander soort deeg gebak. Sy luister en probeer uitmaak wat hulle sê. Sommige woorde klink bekend, ongetwyfeld uit Duits afgelei.

Marta skraap haar moed bymekaar, loop na die toonbank en probeer sin maak van die Engels wat op die spyskaart teen die muur geskryf is. Sy het nie moeite om die pryse uit te maak nie. Die eienaar staan agter die toonbank, besig om ’n bierbeker af te droog. Marta wys na die spyskaart, haal ’n paar sente uit en pak hulle op die toonbank uit. Sy hou haar palms teen mekaar en beweeg haar hande soos ’n vis.

“*Fish and Chips*?”

“*Fish and Chips*,” herhaal sy. “*Danke*.”

Hy bring haar kos en ’n glas water. Hy gaan haal ’n bottel moutasyn by ’n ander tafel en sit dit voor haar neer. “Vir die vis.” Hy beduie.

Marta eet stadig, eksperimenteel, onseker oor wat die diepgebraaide, degerige vis aan haar maag sal doen. Gedurende die volgende uur kom daar nog mense in, en die eetplek is later vol mans en vroue. Sommige het kinders. Marta voel selfbewus omdat sy ’n tafel in beslag neem en loop. Die son het gesak en die mis het in reën verander. Dit neem haar ’n uur om na die huis toe terug te loop.

“Kyk na jou, Marta!” Frau Alger skud haar kop. “Wil jy jou hierdie

keer die dood op die lyf haal?" Sy maak haar by die stoof sit en gee vir haar warm tee. "Hier. Ek het 'n brief vir jou."

Marta se hart klop swaar toe sy Rosie se brief oopskeur.

*My liefste vriendin*

*Ek was bang dat jy my verkwalik omdat ek nie beter na Elise gekyk het nie. Ek het haar die dag na jou ma se begrafnis gaan sien. Ek moes nie gewag het nie. As ek direk na die diens gegaan het, sou Elise dalk nog gelewe het. Maar ek het gewag en ek sal altyd daaroor spyt wees. My ma het saam met my gegaan.*

*Jou pa het gesê hy weet nie waarheen Elise gegaan het nie. Hy het gesê dat sy op die dag van die begrafnis nie uit haar kamer wou kom nie. Hy het eers die volgende dag besef sy is weg. Jou pa het toe uitgegaan om alarm te maak.*

*Ek het onthou hoe graag Elise by die stroom gaan sit het om na die water te luister. Toe ek op haar afkom, het sy soos 'n engel gelyk wat onder 'n wit verekombers aan die slaap geraak het.*

*Ek weet nie hoeveel Felda Braun jou vertel het nie, maar ek het ontdek waarom Elise so weggekruip het. Sy was ver swanger. Mag die Here die Meyer-mans genadig wees vir wat hulle aan jou arme sussie gedoen het.*

*Elise het opgekrul op haar sy gelê, asof om die baba binne-in haar te beskerm en hom warm te hou. My pa het vir my gesê mense wat verkluim, voel geen pyn nie. Ek bid dit is waar.*

*Jy het my gevra om jou te vergewe. Nou vra ek jou om vergifnis. Moet asseblief nie ophou skryf nie. Ek is so lief vir jou soos vir 'n eie sussie. Ek mis jou ontsettend.*

*Jou vriendin vir altyd*

*Rosie*

Marta skryf terug en vra waar Pappa vir Elise begrawe het. Sy huil by die gedagte dat Elise nie langs Mamma begrawe is nie, maar sy weet dat die kerk nie sou toelaat dat 'n selfmoordenaar in gewyde grond begrawe word nie.

Marta trek haar die volgende oggend warm aan, loop na 'n bushalte en ry na Westminster-abdy. Sy gaan sit in een van die banke en wonder wat Mamma van hierdie pragtige kroningskerk sou dink. Die massiewe grys pilare is soos enorme boomstamme waarop die hoë, skemer plafon rus. 'n Reënboog val oor die marmer mosaïekvloer waar die son deur die gebrandskilderde vensters skyn. Maar die lig is vinnig besig om te vervaag. Sy luister hoe die lewendes deur die heiligdom na die dooies toe loop, hoor hulle fluisterstemme in die middeskip met

sy grafkelders waarin die gebeentes van groot digters en politici gehou word, hoor hoe hulle by een of ander brons beeldgraf of sarkofaag gaan stilstaan.

*Ag, Here, waar slaap my sussie? Sal U haar genadig wees en haar na u huis in die hemel dra? Of moet sy die ellende van die hel verduur omdat sy hoop verloor het?*

Marta skrik toe 'n vrou aan haar skouer raak en begin praat. Sy vee haar trane vinnig af. Die vrou praat Engels met haar. Alhoewel sy haar nie verstaan nie, put Marta troos uit die vrou se sagte glimlag en stem. Mamma sou 'n vreemdeling op dieselfde manier getroos het.

Die volgende dag gaan Marta Hyde Park toe en gaan sit op die gras van waar sy kyk hoe die bote op die blou Serpentine verbyvaar. Selfs in die oopte en sonskyn is Marta bewus van die smart wat swaar op haar lê. Mamma het gesê dat die Here 'n toekoms en 'n verwagting vir haar het. Maar wat beteken dit? Is sy veronderstel om te wag totdat God vanuit die hemel met haar praat? "*Gaan,*" het Mamma gesê, maar Marta weet nie meer waarnatoe nie.

Sy weet net dat sy nie so kan aangaan met haar verswelgende hartseer en verwyte nie. Sy moet onthou wat haar in die eerste plek van die huis af weggedryf het. Sy het na die vryheid gesmag om haar volle potensiaal te bereik. Sy het na iets gesmag wat sy haar eie kon noem. Sy gaan nie een van daardie dinge hê as sy haarself sit en bejammer nie.

Voordat sy na die tehuis toe teruggaan, besluit Marta om by die Switserse konsulaat aan te doen.

"Fräulein Schneider!" Kurt Reinhard groet haar hartlik. "Dit is goed om jou te sien. Ek het gehoor jy is weg by die konsul."

Verras dat hy haar enigsins onthou, vertel Marta hom wat gebeur het. "Ek wil my naam asseblief weer op die lys sit, Herr Reinhard. Maar is dit moontlik om hierdie keer vir 'n Engelse huishouding aansoek te doen, verkieslik weg van die roet en rook van Londen."

"Natuurlik. Hoe gou kan jy begin werk?"

"Hoe gouer hoe beter."

"Dan het ek dalk net die plek vir jou."

## Chapter 9

Marta rode to Kew Station and walked the rest of the way to Lady Daisy Stockhard's three-story Tudor house near Kew Gardens. She expected to meet with the mistress of housekeeping. Instead, a stooped butler showed her into a parlor with daybeds and wingback chairs, and a large, low, round table covered with books. Every wall boasted a gilt-framed landscape. The floor was covered with a Persian rug. Curved, carved-legged tables with marble tops held brass lamps, and a pianoforte stood in the far corner with a marble bust of Queen Elizabeth. Over the fireplace hung a portrait of an English army officer in dress uniform.

It took but a few seconds to take it all in and redirect her attention to a white-haired lady dressed elegantly in black, sitting in a straight-backed chair, and another much younger, plump and dressed in frothy folds of pink, sitting on a chaise, her back to the windows and a book open on her lap.

"Thank you, Welton." The older woman took Marta's documents from him and put on tiny, wire-framed glasses as she read.

The younger woman, whom Marta took to be the lady's daughter, said something in English and sighed. Her mother answered pleasantly, to which the daughter lifted her book and made a dismissive sounding comment. The only part of the conversation Marta was fairly certain she understood was that the young woman's name was Millicent.

Lady Stockhard removed her glasses carefully and looked up. She addressed Marta in passable German. "Don't stand in the doorway, Fräulein Schneider." She beckoned. "Come in and let me have a good look at you." Marta came a few steps into the room and stood with her hands clasped in front of her. "Mr. Reinhard tells me you don't speak English. My German is limited. Enid, my cook, will teach you English. Honore and Welton will help as well. He takes care of the gardens. I used to love gardening. It's good for the soul."

Millicent sighed in annoyance. She said something that Marta didn't understand.

Lady Stockhard answered pleasantly and then indicated that Marta should sit in a chair close to her. "I like to get to know the people who would join my staff."

Her daughter glowered and spoke again in English. Marta had no difficulty understanding her condescending tone or dismissive look.

Lady Stockhard said something to her daughter, then smiled and spoke to Marta. “I told her you have training as a dressmaker. That will please her.”

Millicent snapped her book shut and rose. A rustling of skirts announced her departure.

“Do you like gardens, Fräulein?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She didn’t know what to make of Lady Stockhard with her inviting attitude.

“Kew Gardens is a short walk away. I used to spend hours walking there. Now I can only just manage to walk around the house. Someone must take me to Kew Gardens in a wheelchair. Welton is too old, poor dear, and Ingrid met her handsome coachman. I have Melena, but she misses Greece and her family so much, I doubt she’ll stay long. Are you homesick for your family?”

Marta couldn’t hide her surprise that an English lady would talk to her as though passing time with a friend. “I’ve been away from home nearly two years, ma’am.”

“And your mother doesn’t miss you?”

She felt a stab of pain. “My mother died in January, ma’am.”

“Oh.” She looked dismayed. “Please accept my condolences. I don’t mean to pry.” The lady looked down at the documents on her lap. “Marta. A good Christian name. Mr. Reinhard writes you are a good worker, but Swiss girls always are.” Lady Stockhard raised her head and smiled. “I’ve had three in my employ over the years, and not one has disappointed me. I’m sure you won’t either.” She took a small silver bell from her side table and rang it.

A dark-haired, dark-eyed maid appeared. “Yes, Lady Daisy?”

“Honore, please show Marta to her quarters, and then introduce her to Enid and Melena.” She leaned over and put her hand on Marta’s knee. “English from now on, dear. It will be difficult at first, but you will learn more quickly that way.”

Enid, the rotund and loquacious cook, spoke German, English, and French. When Marta said she had never met anyone like Lady Stockhard, who treated a servant so kindly, Enid nodded. “Oh, our lady is someone very special. She’s not like so many others who look down their noses on those who serve them. Not like her daughter, who gives herself airs. Lady Daisy always hires foreign servants. She says it’s an inexpensive way to visit another country. Melena is from Greece, Honore comes from France, and I’m from Scotland. Now, we have you, our little Swiss maid. Lady Daisy says if people can get

along, then countries can also."

"And Welton?"

"British, of course. He served with Sir Clive in India. When Welton returned, he came to pay his respects to our lady. He had retired and needed work. Of course, Lady Daisy hired him immediately and gave him the room over the carriage house. Welton and my late husband, Ronald, became good friends. Enough talking in German. I find it exhausting. And we have much to do." As they worked side by side, Enid pointed out objects, said the English word, and had Marta repeat it.

The next morning, the more reticent Honore taught Marta English phrases while they made beds, freshened rooms, and folded away clothing Miss Millicent had cast on chairs and floor that afternoon before going to call on a friend.

"Good morning, Miss Stockhard." Marta repeated the phrase. "Do you wish the drapes drawn, Miss Stockhard? May I bring you breakfast in bed, Miss Stockhard?"

Even the taciturn Welton became Marta's instructor. When Enid sent her out for fresh vegetables from the garden, Welton carried on with names posted at the ends of rows. "Lettuce, cucumber, string, pole, beans, gate," he told her, then shouted, "Rabbit!" He followed the last word with a string of others Marta knew better than to repeat.

Every afternoon, Lady Stockhard rang her little silver bell, sat in her wheelchair, and waited for Melena to come and take her for an outing to Kew Gardens. Marta helped Enid prepare savories and sweets for high tea. As soon as Lady Stockhard and Melena returned, Marta wheeled the tea cart into the conservatory. She set a table with a silver pot of Ceylon or India tea spiced with cinnamon, ginger, and cloves and plates of cucumber sandwiches, Scotch eggs, and currant brioches.

"What would you like, Melena?"

Lady Stockhard never ceased to surprise Marta. "She's serving tea to Melena, as though she's a guest and not a servant," she told Enid.

"She often does when Miss Millicent is out of the house. Sometimes, when her daughter goes traveling, Lady Daisy will even join us in the kitchen."

Enid, like Warner Brennholtz, shared her culinary knowledge openly. She didn't mind when Marta wrote notes in her book, even going so far as to read what she wrote and add tidbits Marta may have forgotten. Marta filled pages with recipes for crumbly scones, Scottish

shortbread, Chelsea buns, Yorkshire pudding, steak and kidney pie, and Lancashire hotpot.

"I've got a dozen others to give you," Enid told her. "Shepherd's pie, toad-in-the-hole, and oxtail soup are a few of our lady's favorites, but Miss Millicent would rather have rack of lamb and beef Wellington. When the young lady goes off on her next trip, we'll have ourselves some plain English cooking again." Enid rubbed seasonings into a hunk of meat.

"Miss Millicent must love to travel."

Enid snorted. "She has her motives." She shrugged and rolled the roast, rubbing more seasonings on the underside.

Marta received a letter from Rosie.

*Elise is buried in our favorite meadow. Spring flowers are in bloom. I have not gone to church since Elise died, but I sit on our log and pray for her soul every day.*

*Father John came up yesterday afternoon. He told me he would rather lie beneath a blanket of flowers with a view of Thunersee and the mountains than be under six feet of dirt in the confines of stone walls inside town. When I cried, he held me.*

*He said the church must have rules, but God is Elise's Maker and God is just and merciful. He said the Lord promised not to lose any of His children. His words helped me, Marta. I hope they will help you, too.*

Marta wished she could feel at peace, but she couldn't shake the guilt. Had she gone home, Mama might still have died, but surely Elise would have lived. How dared she go on making plans for herself when it had been her dream that made her leave them behind—vulnerable, unloved, and unprotected? Though she despised her father, perhaps he was right after all. She did think of herself first; she did think she could do better than her brother. She was ambitious and unrepentantly disobedient. Perhaps he was also right in saying she deserved nothing more than to serve in someone else's household. But before God, she swore it would never be his.

When Melena went home to Greece, Marta found herself assigned to new responsibilities.

*Dear Rosie,*

*I have become Lady Daisy's companion. She is a most unusual lady. I have never known anyone to discuss so many interesting topics. She doesn't treat her servants like slaves, but is genuinely interested in our lives. She had me sit with her in church last Sunday.*

Often, during their outings to Kew Gardens, Lady Stockhard talked about books. "Feel free to use my library, Marta. I can only read one at a time, and books shouldn't gather dust. It's lovely in spring, isn't it? Of course, the gardens are always lovely, even in winter. The holly leaves look greener and the red berries redder against the snow. You must need to rest by now. Let's sit awhile by the pond."

Waxy purple and yellow lilies rose on thick stems above the huge, green, plate-shaped leaves floating on the murky surface of the water. Mama would have loved Kew Gardens with all its varied beauty, birds flitting and fluttering from tree to tree, and rainbows in the misty spring rain.

Marta pushed the wheelchair along the walk through a wooded glen. It reminded her of the lush green of Switzerland. Flowers popped bright faces up among the green grasses. Marta felt suddenly homesick for the Alpine meadows covered with spring blossoms. Grief welled up as she thought of Elise sleeping beneath a blanket of spring green and flowers and Rosie sitting on the fallen tree, praying for her soul. Wiping away tears, she pushed Lady Daisy along in the wheelchair.

"Do you miss your mother?"

"Yes, ma'am." And Elise, though she never spoke of her.

"I know what it is to mourn. I lost my husband to fever in India twenty years ago, and there isn't a day that passes that I don't miss him. Millicent was six when I brought her home. I wonder sometimes if she remembers her father or India with all its exotic scents and sounds." She laughed sadly. "We rode together on an elephant more than once, and she loved to watch the local snake charmer."

"No one would ever forget such things, Lady Daisy."

"Not unless they wanted to forget." Lady Stockhard smoothed the blanket covering her legs. "We grieve for those we've lost, but it's the living that cause us the most pain. Poor Millicent. I don't know what will become of her."

Marta didn't know how to boost Lady Daisy's spirits.

"Don't worry about Lady Daisy," Enid told Marta that evening. "She gets like this sometimes after Miss Millicent leaves on holiday. She'll be herself in a few days."

"Why doesn't Lady Daisy travel with her daughter?"

"She did for a while, but things never worked out when our lady was along. Miss Millicent prefers going alone. She sees the world differently than our lady. And who's to say who's right. The world is

what it is."

None of the staff had any fondness for Miss Millicent, especially Welton, who stayed to the garden as much as possible whenever Lady Daisy's daughter was home. The air grew colder in the house when Miss Millicent was present. When summoned, Marta went quickly to wherever Miss Millicent might be, curtsied, received her instructions, curtsied again, and departed to do what she had been told. Unlike Lady Stockhard, Miss Millicent never addressed a servant by name, asked how she felt, or discussed anything.

After six months in Lady Stockhard's employ, Marta had learned enough English to follow whatever instructions might be given.

She disliked Miss Millicent almost as much as she liked Lady Daisy. The young woman treated her mother with contempt. "One might think you prefer the company of servants to that of peers, Mother."

"I like everyone."

"Everyone is not worthy. Did you have to talk to the gardener in the front yard?"

"His name is Welton, Millicent, and he's part of the family."

"It's about time tea arrived!" she complained. "The point is, everyone in the neighborhood saw you. What will people think?"

"That I'm talking to my gardener."

"You're impossible." Miss Millicent treated her mother like a recalcitrant child. Leaning forward, she looked at the tiered dishes and groaned. "Egg and watercress sandwiches again, Mother. Cook knows I prefer spicy chicken and currant brioches. And it would be nice to have chocolate *éclairs* more often than once a month."

Marta positioned the trolley and set the silver tea service on the table, closer to Lady Stockhard than her daughter, turning the handle so her lady could easily grasp it. She felt Miss Millicent's cold glare. When Marta put the tiered dishes within easy reach as well, Lady Daisy smiled at her. "Thank you, Marta."

"The girl doesn't know how to set a table." Miss Millicent rose enough to reach across and grasp the teapot. Pouring herself a cup of tea, she returned the pot to where Marta had placed it. Then she proceeded to fill her plate with sandwich wedges, sponge drops with jam, and cream-filled strawberry meringues. "No one needs to talk to a gardener for longer than a few minutes, Mother, and you were outside for the better part of an hour. Do you have any idea what people will say about that?" She sat and put an entire sponge drop

into her mouth. Her cheeks bulged as she chewed.

Lady Stockhard poured her own tea. “People always talk, Millicent.” She added a bit of cream and two scoops of sugar. “If they have nothing to talk about, they’ll invent something.”

“They won’t have to invent a thing. It doesn’t even occur to you how I feel, does it? How can I show my face outside the front door when my mother is the scandal of the neighborhood?”

Fuming, Marta returned to the kitchen. “Miss Millicent wants spicy chicken sandwiches tomorrow.”

“If I make spicy chicken, she’ll want something else. There’s no pleasing her.”

“I’m surprised Miss Millicent receives so many invitations.”

“She can be quite charming when she has reason to be. And I understand she can be quite pleasing to young men.” Enid shrugged. “I’ll be needing more carrots and another onion. Why don’t you go on out to the garden? You look like you could use a breath of fresh air. But don’t be long. Her Highness will be wanting the tea things removed from the parlor. She’s invited guests for dinner.”

Miss Millicent stayed home for two months, then left again.

“She must love to travel.”

Enid gave a snort. “She’s gone hunting. And I don’t mean foxes.”

“What, then?”

“Miss Millicent is off on another one of her husband-hunting expeditions. It’s Brighton this time because she heard a friend has a brother who’s eligible. She’ll be home in a few weeks, disappointed. She’ll be moody and disagreeable, and she’ll stuff herself with scones and marmalade, cakes and spicy chicken sandwiches. Then, she’ll start writing letters again, and she’ll keep writing until someone invites her to come for a visit on the Continent or in Stratford-upon-Avon or in Cornwall. She meets people everywhere she goes, and she keeps their names and addresses.”

Enid’s prophecy proved true. Miss Millicent came home after two weeks, and she stayed in her room for another, demanding that all her meals be brought to her. Marta would find her propped up in bed, reading Jane Austen romances. After exhausting the staff with constant demands, she went off to Dover to visit a sick friend.

“I heard her tell Lady Daisy the lady must be on her deathbed,” Marta told Enid. “The vicar comes to visit several times a week.”

“A vicar, you say? Well, maybe Miss Millicent is beginning to see the light and lowering her standards. But if the man has a lick of

sense, he'll heed the apostle Paul's advice and remain unmarried!"

Miss Millicent returned in a foul temper.

Lady Daisy ordered beef Wellington. Enid clucked her tongue as she iced a chocolate cake. "Things must not have gone well in Dover. No big surprise there. Miss Millicent will be off again soon enough, to Brighton or Cambridge."

Millicent didn't spend a week in her room this time. She lounged in the conservatory, regaling her mother with complaints. "It's a perfectly horrid place, Mother. I don't know why anyone would want to live in that cold, dreary place."

"Did you attend church with Susanna?"

"Of course, but I didn't like the vicar at all. For all his kind attention to Susanna, he was quite dull."

Back in the kitchen, Enid sighed. "More likely she tossed out her line and didn't even get a bite."

Another letter came from Rosie. She had married Arik, and she expected to be blissfully happy for the rest of her life. She wished the same to Marta, who felt a sense of loss and envy. Ashamed she could resent such happiness, Marta prayed God would bless them and spent a month's salary on white lawn, Irish lace, satin ribbons, silk embroidery thread, needles, and a hoop. While others slept, Marta sat in an alcove with a candle burning and made a dressing gown fit for a princess. It took two months to finish it.

> *I have never worn anything so beautiful in my life! Even my wedding dress could not compare. I have wonderful news. Arik and I expect a baby to arrive just before our first anniversary.*
>
> *I can't express to you how happy I am. I pray God will bless you with happiness, too, Marta. I pray you will meet someone you can love as much as I love Arik.*

Marta folded the letter away and added it to the growing bundle. Love could be a two-edged sword. What guarantee was there that it would be returned? Solange and Rosie had been blessed by the men they loved. Mama had not been so fortunate. Marta began work on a christening gown and bonnet.

## Hoofstuk 9

Marta ry tot by Kew-stasie en loop die res van die pad na lady Daisy Stockhard se drieverdiepinghuis naby Kew Gardens. Sy het verwag om deur die hoofhuishoudster ontvang te word. In plaas daarvan neem ’n krom butler haar na ’n sitkamer met rusbeddens en gemakstoele, en ’n groot, lae, ronde tafel vol boeke. Al vier mure is behang met landskappe in vergulde rame. ’n Persiese mat bedek die vloer. Koperlampe staan op marmertafels met kunstig gekerfde pote. In die oorkantste hoek staan ’n klavesimbel met ’n marmer borsbeeld van koningin Elizabeth. Bokant die kaggel hang ’n skildery van ’n Britse offisier in uniform.

Dit neem haar enkele sekondes om dit alles in te neem, en dan wend sy haar na die regop stoel van ’n ou dame wat elegant in swart geklee is. ’n Ander veel jonger, plomp vrou in pienk frille sit op ’n sitbank, haar rug na die venster en ’n boek oop op haar skoot.

“Dankie, Welton.” Die ouer vrou neem Marta se dokumente by hom en sit ’n klein brilletjie op voordat sy begin lees.

Die jonger vrou, Marta neem aan dis die dame se dogter, sê iets in Engels en sug. Haar ma antwoord vriendelik waarop die dogter haar boek optel en iets met ’n afwysende klank in haar stem sê. Die enigste deel van die gesprek wat Marta taamlik seker is sy verstaan, is dat die jong vrou se naam Millicent is.

Lady Stockhard haal haar brilletjie versigtig af en kyk op. Sy praat in gangbare Duits. “Moenie daar in die deur staan nie, Fräulein Schneider.” Sy wink. “Kom in sodat ek mooi na jou kan kyk.” Marta kom ’n paar treë nader en staan met haar hande voor haar gevou. “Meneer Reinhard sê my dat jy nie Engels praat nie. My Duits is maar beperk. Enid, my kok, sal jou leer Engels praat. Honore en Welton sal ook help. Hy versorg die tuin. Ek was altyd so lief vir tuinmaak. Dis goed vir die siel.”

Millicent sug ergerlik. Sy sê iets wat Marta nie verstaan nie.

Lady Stockhard antwoord vriendelik en wys dat Marta op een van die stoele naby haar moet kom sit. “Ek hou daarvan om die mense te

leer ken wat ek gaan aanstel."

Haar dogter frons en praat weer in Engels. Marta sukkel nie om haar neerbuigende stemtoon of minagtende kyk te verstaan nie.

Lady Stockhard sê iets vir haar dogter, glimlag en praat met Marta. "Ek het vir haar gesê dat jy as kleremaakster opgelei is. Dit behoort haar tevrede te stel."

Millicent klap haar boek toe en staan op. Haar uittog word deur 'n geritsel van rokmateriaal vergesel.

"Hou jy van tuine, Fräulein?"

"Ja, Mevrou." Sy weet nie hoe om lady Stockhard se innemendheid te verstaan nie.

"Kew Gardens is net 'n entjie se stap hiervandaan. Ek het altyd ure daar rondgedwaal. Nou kan ek nouliks in die huis rondloop. Iemand moet my in 'n rolstoel na Kew Gardens toe neem. Welton is te oud, die arme siel, en Ingrid het haar aantreklike koetsier ontmoet. Ek het vir Melena, maar sy verlang te veel na Griekeland en haar ouers. Ek twyfel of sy lank sal bly. Verlang jy na jou familie?"

Marta is seker haar verbasing wys. Dat 'n Engelse dame sowaar met haar sit en gesels asof sy saam met haar vriendin kuier! "Ek is al amper twee jaar van die huis af weg, Mevrou."

"En verlang jou ma nie na jou nie?"

Dis van voor af seer. "My ma is in Januarie oorlede, Mevrou."

"Ai tog." Sy lyk jammer. "My innige simpatie. Ek wil nie nuuskierig wees nie." Die dame kyk vir 'n oomblik na die dokumente op haar skoot. "Marta. 'n Goeie Bybelse naam. Meneer Reinhard skryf dat jy 'n goeie werker is, maar Switserse meisies is gewoonlik." Lady Stockhard kyk op en glimlag. "Deur die jare het ek drie in my diens gehad en nie een van hulle het my teleurgestel nie. Ek is seker jy sal ook nie." Sy tel 'n klein silwerklokkie op die tafel langs haar op en lui dit.

'n Meisie met donker hare en oë verskyn. "Ja, lady Daisy?"

"Honore, neem Marta asseblief na haar kamer toe, en gaan stel haar voor aan Enid en Melena." Sy leun vorentoe en plaas haar hand op Marta se knie. "Engels van nou af, my kind. Aan die begin sal dit moeilik wees, maar dis die vinnigste manier om te leer."

Enid, die mollige en spraaksame kok, praat Duits, Engels en Frans. Toe Marta sê dat sy nog nooit iemand soos lady Stockhard ontmoet het wat bediendes so vriendelik behandel nie, knik Enid. "Ag, ons dame is iemand baie spesiaal. Sy is nie soos baie ander mense wat neersien op dié wat hulle bedien nie. Nie soos haar aanstellerige dogter nie. Lady Daisy het nog altyd bediendes uit ander lande

aangestel. Sy sê dit is ’n goedkoop manier om ’n ander land te besoek. Melena kom van Griekeland, Honore van Frankryk en ek is van Skotland. En nou het ons vir jou, ons klein Switserse aanstelling. Lady Daisy sê dat as mense oor die weg kan kom, lande dit ook kan doen.”

“En Welton?”

“Brits, natuurlik. Hy het saam met sir Clive in Indië diens gedoen. Toe Welton teruggekeer het, het hy sy simpatie aan ons dame kom betuig. Hy was afgetree en het werk nodig gehad. Lady Daisy het hom natuurlik dadelik aangestel en hom die kamer bo die koetshuis gegee. Welton en my oorlede man, Ronald, het goeie vriende geword. Nou is ek moeg in Duits gepraat. Ek vind dit uitputtend. En daar is baie wat gedoen moet word.” Waar hulle sy aan sy werk, wys Enid na voorwerpe, sê die Engelse woord, en laat Marta dit herhaal.

Die volgende oggend is dit die meer teruggetrokke Honore se beurt om Engelse frases vir Marta te leer terwyl hulle besig is om beddens op te maak, kamers op te ruim en die klere op te vou wat juffrou Millicent die middag op die vloer en oor stoele gegooi het voordat sy by ’n vriendin gaan kuier het.

“Goeiemôre, juffrou Stockhard.” Marta herhaal die frase. “Kan ek die gordyne oopmaak, juffrou Stockhard? Kan ek vir u ontbyt in die bed bring, juffrou Stockhard?”

Selfs die swygsame Welton word Marta se instrukteur. Wanneer Enid haar tuin toe stuur vir vars groente begin Welton met die naambordjies wat aan die einde van die rye geplant is. “Blaarslaai, komkommer, draad, paaltjie, bone, hek,” beduie hy, en dan gil hy ontsteld: “Haas!” Marta weet van beter as om die volgende rits woorde te herhaal.

Elke middag lui lady Stockhard haar klein silwerklokkie en wag in haar rolstoel sodat Melena haar vir ’n uitstappie na Kew Gardens kan neem. Marta help Enid om sout en soet versnaperings vir die teemaaltyd voor te berei. Wanneer lady Stockhard en Melena terugkom, stoot Marta die teetrollie na die glashuis. Sy dek ’n tafel met ’n pot Ceylon of Indiese tee gegeur met kaneel, gemmer en naeltjies, komkommertoebroodjies, Skotse eiers en korentekoekies.

“Wat kan ek vir jou aanbied, Melena?”

Marta verwonder haar elke dag ’n bietjie meer aan lady Stockhard. “Daar sit sy vir Melena en tee bedien asof sy ’n gas en nie ’n bediende is nie,” vertel sy vir Enid.

“Sy doen dit gereeld as juffrou Millicent nie by die huis is nie. Soms, wanneer haar dogter uitstedig is, sal lady Daisy selfs in die kombuis

by ons kom kuier."

Nes Warner Brennholtz is Enid ook nie suinig met haar kulinêre kennis nie. Sy gee nie om as Marta aantekeninge maak nie, gaan selfs sover om dit te lees en hier en daar iets by te voeg wat Marta uitgelaat het. Marta skryf bladsye vol resepte vir krummelrige botterbroodjies, Skotse brosbeskuitjies, Chelseabolletjies, Yorkshirepoeding, steak-en-lewer-pastei en Lancashirehutspot.

"Ek het nog dosyne om vir jou te gee," sê Enid vir haar. "Herderspastei, ouvrou-onder-die-kombers en beesstertsop is maar 'n paar van ons dame se gunstelinge, maar juffrou Millicent sal eerder lamribstuk en bief Wellington eet. Wanneer die jong juffer op haar volgende reis vertrek, bederf ons onsself weer met ons Engelse kosse." Enid is besig om kruie in 'n stuk vleis in te vryf.

"Juffrou Millicent is seker baie lief vir reis."

Enid snork. "Sy het haar motiewe." Sy haal haar skouers op toe sy die braaiboud omdraai om nog kruie aan die onderkant in te vryf.

Marta ontvang 'n brief van Rosie.

> *Elise is in ons gunsteling weiveld begrawe. Daar is oral lenteblomme. Sedert Elise se dood was ek nog nie weer in die kerk nie, maar ek gaan sit op ons stomp en bid elke dag vir haar siel.*
>
> *Vader John het gistermiddag soontoe gekom. Hy sê hy lê eerder onder blomme met 'n uitsig op die Thunersee en die berge as ses voet onder die grond tussen klipmure in die dorp. Hy het my vasgehou toe ek gehuil het.*
>
> *Hy sê die kerk moet hulle reëls hê, maar God is Elise se Skepper en God is regverdig en genadig. Hy sê die Here belowe dat nie een van sy kinders verlore sal gaan nie. Sy woorde het my gehelp, Marta. Ek hoop hulle help jou ook.*

Marta wens sy kon vrede kry, maar sy kan nie van haar skuldlas ontslae raak nie. As sy huis toe gegaan het, sou Mamma dalk steeds doodgegaan het, maar Elise sou beslis nog gelewe het. Hoe durf sy aangaan en haar eie planne maak as dit haar droom was wat gemaak het dat sy hulle agtergelaat het – kwesbaar, ongeliefd en onbeskermd. Alhoewel sy haar pa verag, was hy dalk reg. Sy dink eerste aan haarself; sy dink sy kan beter vaar as haar broer. Sy is ambisieus en onbewoë ongehoorsaam. Dalk is hy ook reg as hy sê dat sy niks meer verdien as om in iemand anders se huis te werk nie. Maar sy het voor die Here gesweer dat dit nooit so sal wees nie. Toe Melena teruggaan Griekeland toe, word daar ander verantwoordelikhede aan Marta toegeskryf.

*Liewe Rosie*

*Ek het lady Daisy se metgesel geword. Sy is ’n buitengewone mens. Ek het nog nooit iemand geken wat oor soveel interessante onderwerpe kan gesels nie. Sy behandel haar bediendes nie soos slawe nie, maar stel opreg belang in ons lewe. Sy het my verlede Sondag langs haar in die kerk laat sit.*

Gedurende hulle uitstappies na Kew Gardens praat lady Stockhard dikwels oor boeke. “Jy kan gerus van my biblioteek gebruik maak, Marta. Ek kan net een op ’n slag lees en dit is nie reg dat boeke net stof vergaar nie. Is die lente nie lieflik nie? Die tuine is natuurlik altyd mooi, selfs in die winter. Die hulsboom se blare lyk groener en die rooi bessies rooier teen die sneeu. Jy is nou al seker moeg geloop. Kom ons gaan sit ’n rukkie by die water.”

Wasagtige pers en geel lelies verrys bokant die groot, plat, groen blare wat op die troebel oppervlak van die water dryf. Mamma sou Kew Garden so geniet het met sy skoonheid, die bome vol kwetterende voëls, en die reënboë in die mistige lentereën.

Marta stoot die rolstoel deur ’n woudagtige dal. Dit herinner haar aan die welige groen van Switserland. Die blomme staan met helder gesiggies tussen die groen gras. Marta verlang skielik na die Alpynse blommeweelde, en haar hart krimp by die gedagte aan Elise onder haar kombers van lentegras en blomme en Rosie wat op die omgevalle boom sit en vir haar siel bid. Sy vee haar trane sommer so in die loop af.

“Verlang jy na jou ma?”

“Ja, Mevrou.” En Elise, al praat sy nooit oor haar nie.

“Ek weet wat dit is om te treur. Ek het my man 20 jaar gelede in Indië verloor, en nie ’n dag gaan verby dat ek hom nie mis nie. Millicent was ses jaar oud toe ek haar huis toe gebring het. Ek wonder soms of sy haar pa onthou. Of Indië met sy eksotiese geure en klanke.” Sy lag hartseer. “Ons het meer as een maal saam op ’n olifant se rug gery en sy was mal daaroor om na die plaaslike slangbesweerder te kyk.”

“Dit is dinge wat niemand sal vergeet nie, lady Daisy.”

“Nie tensy hulle wil vergeet nie.” Lady Stockhard vryf oor die kombers oor haar bene. “Ons treur oor die mense wat ons verloor het, maar dit is die lewendes wat ons die grootste leed aandoen. Arme Millicent. Ek weet nie wat van haar gaan word nie.”

Marta weet nie hoe om lady Daisy op te beur nie.

“Moet jou nie oor lady Daisy bekommer nie,” sê Enid daardie aand

vir haar. "Sy raak soms so wanneer juffrou Millicent op vakansie vertrek. Oor 'n paar dae sal sy weer haar ou self wees."

"Hoekom reis lady Daisy nie saam met haar dogter nie?"

"Sy het aanvanklik, maar dinge het nooit uitgewerk wanneer ons lady saamgegaan het nie. Juffrou Millicent verkies dit om alleen te gaan. Sy sien die wêreld anders as ons lady. En wie is reg? Die wêreld is wat dit is."

Nie een van die personeellede koester enige toegeneentheid teenoor juffrou Millicent nie. Die minste van almal Welton, wat soveel tyd moontlik in die tuin deurbring wanneer lady Daisy se dogter by die huis is. Daar is 'n kilte in die huis wanneer juffrou Millicent teenwoordig is. Wanneer Marta ontbied word, haas sy haar na waar juffrou Millicent ook al is, kniebuig, ontvang haar opdrag, kniebuig weer, en gaan doen wat sy verlang. Anders as lady Stockhard het Millicent 'n bediende nog nooit op die naam aangespreek, gevra hoe dit gaan of enigiets bespreek nie.

Ná ses maande in lady Stockhard se diens het Marta genoeg Engels geleer om enige opdrag te verstaan wat sy ontvang.

Haar renons in juffrou Millicent is amper net so groot soos haar liefde vir lady Daisy. Die jong vrou behandel haar ma met minagting. "'n Mens sou dink dat Ma die geselskap van bediendes bo dié van gelykes verkies."

"Ek hou van almal."

"Nie almal is dit werd nie. Was dit nodig dat Ma in die voortuin met die tuinier praat?"

"Sy naam is Welton, Millicent, en hy is deel van die familie."

"Dis omtrent hoog tyd dat 'n mens tee kry in hierdie huis!" kla sy. "Die punt is, die hele buurt het Ma gesien. Wat gaan die mense dink?"

"Dat ek met my tuinier praat."

"Ma is onmoontlik." Juffrou Millicent behandel haar ma soos 'n stout kind. Sy leun vooroor en kyk na die eetgoed en kreun. "Dis al weer eier-en-slaai-toebroodjies, Ma. Die kok weet ek verkies speseryhoender en korentekoek. En dit sou gaaf wees om meer as een maal 'n maand sjokolade *éclairs* te hê."

Marta posisioneer die trollie en dek die tafel sodat die teeservies nader aan lady Stockhard as haar dogter is, en plaas die teepot só dat haar lady die handvatsel maklik kan bykom. Sy is bewus van juffrou Millicent se koue blik. Toe Marta die opdienbord ook binne reikafstand neersit, glimlag lady Daisy vir haar. "Dankie, Marta."

"Die kind weet nie hoe om tafel te dek nie." Juffrou Millicent kom

halforent om die teepot op te tel. Nadat sy vir haarself 'n koppie tee geskink het, plaas sy die pot waar Marta dit neergesit het. Dan pak sy haar bordjie vol toebroodjies, botterbroodjies met konfyt en roomgevulde aarbeiskuimpies. "Niemand hoef langer as 'n paar minute met 'n tuinier te praat nie, Moeder, en Ma was amper 'n uur lank buite. Het Ma enige idee wat die mense daaroor te sê sal hê?" Sy gaan sit en prop 'n hele sponsbeskuitjie in haar mond. Haar kieste bol terwyl sy kou.

Lady Stockhard skink haar eie tee. "Die mense sal altyd praat, Millicent." Sy voeg 'n bietjie melk by en twee lepeltjies suiker. "As daar niks is waaroor hulle kan praat nie, sal hulle iets uitdink."

"Hulle sal niks hoef uit te dink nie. Dit kom nie eens by Ma op hoe ek voel nie. Hoe kan ek my gesig buite die huis wys as my ma die skandaal van die woonbuurt is?"

Marta loop siedend kombuis toe. "Juffrou Millicent wil môre toebroodjies met speseryhoender hê."

"As ek speseryhoender maak, sal sy iets anders wil hê. Dis onmoontlik om haar tevrede te stel."

"Dit verbaas my dat juffrou Millicent soveel uitnodigings ontvang."

"Sy kan heel sjarmant wees as sy wil. En ek verstaan sy het nogal 'n slag met jong mans." Enid haal haar skouers op. "Ek sal nog wortels en 'n ui nodig hê. Hoekom gaan haal jy dit nie vir my nie? Dit lyk asof jy kan doen met 'n bietjie vars lug. Moet net nie lank vat nie. Haar Hoogheid sal wil hê die teegoed moet weggeneem word. Sy het gaste vir ete genooi."

Juffrou Millicent bly vir twee maande, en dan is sy weer vort.

"Sy moet baie lief wees vir reis."

Enid snork onvroulik. "Sy het gaan jag. En ek praat nie van jakkalse nie."

"Nou wat dan?"

"Juffrou Millicent is weer op een van haar manjag-ekspedisies. Hierdie keer is dit Brighton, want sy het gehoor dat 'n vriendin 'n hubare broer het. Sy sal oor 'n paar weke teleurgesteld huis toe kom. Sy sal buierig en onaangenaam wees, en sy sal haar aan botterbroodjies en marmelade, koek en hoendertoebroodjies vergryp. Dan sal sy weer begin briewe skryf en sy sal aanhou skryf totdat iemand haar nooi om iewers in Europa of in Stratford-upon-Avon of in Cornwall te gaan kuier. Sy ontmoet mense net waar sy gaan, en sy hou hulle name en adresse.

Enid se woorde was profeties. Twee weke later is juffrou Millicent

terug. Sy bly vir ’n week in haar kamer en dring daarop aan dat al haar maaltye na haar toe gebring word. Wanneer Marta inkom, sit sy teen opgestapelde kussings en lees een van Jane Austin se liefdesverhale. Nadat sy die personeel met haar aanhoudende eise geteister het, gaan kuier sy vir ’n siek vriendin in Dover.

“Ek het haar vir lady Daisy hoor sê dat die vriendin op haar sterfbed is,” vertel Marta vir Enid. “Die predikant kom ’n paar maal ’n week besoek aflê.”

“’n Predikant, sê jy? Nou ja, dalk is juffrou Millicent uiteindelik besig om lig te sien en haar standaarde te verlaag. Maar as die man ’n druppel verstand het, sal hy die apostel Paulus se raad volg en ongetroud bly!”

Juffrou Millicent is in ’n vieslike bui toe sy terugkom.

Lady Daisy bestel bief Wellington. Enid klik met haar tong terwyl sy ’n sjokoladekoek versier. “Lyk my nie die Dover-storie het goed afgeloop nie. Nie dat dit my verbaas nie. Juffrou Millicent sal wel binnekort weer haar tassies pak vir Brighton of Cambridge.”

Hierdie keer bly Millicent nie ’n week in haar kamer nie. Sy gaan plak haarself in die glashuis neer, en tempteer haar ma met haar klagtes. “Dit is ’n aaklige plek, Moeder. Ek weet nie hoe enigiemand in so ’n koue, mistroostige plek wil bly nie.”

“Was jy saam met Susanna kerk toe?”

“Natuurlik, maar ek het glad nie van die predikant gehou nie. Ten spyte van al sy deernis met Susanna is hy maar ’n vaal mannetjie.”

In die kombuis gee Enid net ’n sug. “Tien teen een het sy haar lyn uitgegooi en nie eens ’n byt gekry nie.”

Sy kry nog ’n brief van Rosie. Sy en Arik het getrou en sy glo dat sy vir die res van haar lewe salig gelukkig gaan wees. Sy wens dieselfde vir haar vriendin. Marta kan nie help om ’n gevoel van verlies en afguns te ervaar nie. Skaam dat sy so opstandig oor iemand anders se geluk kan voel, bid Marta dat die Here hulle sal seën. Sy spandeer ’n maand se salaris aan wit batis, Ierse kant en satynlinte, syborduurgare, naalde en ’n hoepel. Terwyl die ander slaap, sit Marta by ’n kers en maak ’n kamerjas geskik vir ’n prinses. Dit neem haar twee maande om te voltooi.

> *Ek het nog nooit in my lewe so iets aangehad nie! Selfs my trourok kan nie daarmee vergelyk nie. Ek het wonderlike nuus. Ek en Arik verwag ’n baba net voor ons eerste herdenking.*
>
> *Ek kan nie beskryf hoe gelukkig ek is nie. Ek bid dat die Here jou ook met geluk sal seën, Marta. Ek bid dat jy iemand ontmoet vir wie*

*jy so lief kan wees soos wat ek vir Arik is.*

Marta vou die papier op en bêre dit by die res van haar briewe. Liefde kan ’n tweesnydende swaard wees. Watter waarborg is daar dat dit beantwoord sal word? Solange en Rosie is met mans geseën vir wie hulle lief is. Mamma was nie so gelukkig nie. Marta begin aan ’n dooprok en kappie werk.

## Chapter 10

A strained ambivalence took hold of Marta. She continued to save money, but she stopped making grandiose plans about having her own boardinghouse. She tried to follow Mama's advice and count her blessings. She had grown deeply fond of Lady Daisy and enjoyed being her companion. She respected and had great affection for Enid. She liked Welton, and she had befriended Gabriella, the new girl from Italy. Marta set herself the task of learning Italian while teaching her English. Life was good enough in Lady Stockhard's household. Why change things?

Marta had collected the best of Enid's recipes and tucked away the book Rosie had given her. She didn't write letters to Rosie as often as she had during her first three years away from Steffisburg. Rosie's letters still arrived with regularity, filled with glowing words about Arik and going on and on about every little change in baby Henrik. And now she expected another. Rosie had always been a wonderful friend, but there was an unconscious insensitivity in the way she shared her joy. Each time Marta read one of her letters, she felt as though salt were being poured over her wounds.

She could almost empathize with Miss Millicent's increasing frustration over not finding a suitable husband.

Every Sunday when Marta went to church, she imagined Mama sitting beside her. She prayed God would have mercy on Elise's soul. Although the dreams had stopped after a year, she sometimes longed for them to return, afraid she was already forgetting Mama's and Elise's faces. The ache remained like a heavy stone inside her. Occasionally, unexpectedly, the grief would swell up and catch hold of her throat until she felt she was choking on it. She never cried in front of anyone. She waited, searching desperately for something to do to keep her mind occupied. At night, she had no defenses. In the dark, she felt free to release the pent-up pain inside her.

When she couldn't sleep, she borrowed another book from Lady Daisy's library.

Time passed most pleasantly when Miss Millicent was off on one of her hunting expeditions, far less amiably when the miss languished at home. Marta liked having Lady Daisy all to herself. She thought Miss Millicent the most foolish girl she had ever met to take her mother so for granted. Lady Daisy had entered her declining years. Someday she would be gone. Who would love Miss Millicent then?

A year passed and then another. Marta took comfort in her routine. She got up early every morning and helped Enid prepare breakfast, then did housekeeping chores with Gabriella. Every afternoon, rain or shine, she took Lady Daisy on an outing to Kew Gardens. If Miss Millicent was home, Gabriella did the running to and fro. Marta wrote once a month to Rosie, though she had less and less to tell her friend.

Often after everyone had gone to bed, Marta would sit in the library and read. One night Lady Daisy found her standing by the shelves. "What have you been reading?" She held out her hand, and Marta handed over the book she had intended to return. "*The Battle for Gaul* by Julius Caesar." She chuckled. "Rather grim reading, don't you think? Certainly not something I would ever choose." She smiled at Marta. "It was one of Clive's favorites." She handed the book back to Marta, and Marta slid it back into its place. Lady Daisy pulled a slim volume from a shelf. "I prefer Lord Tennyson's poems." She held it out to Marta. "Why don't you take this with you tomorrow when we go to the gardens?"

After Tennyson, Lady Daisy told Marta to select something. After one afternoon of listening to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, Lady Daisy brought *A Tale of Two Cities* with her. Sometimes Marta would read to her in the evening. Lady Daisy selected Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* next and followed that with Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*. Sometimes Miss Millicent became so bored or distraught, she came along to listen.

Marta continued reading whenever she had a moment to herself, often keeping a book tucked in her apron pocket.

Rosie wrote with surprising news.

*Your father married a woman from Thun the summer after your mother died. I didn't know how to tell you. She manages your father's shop, and if I dare say it, she manages your father as well. Apparently, his wife has connections. She saw that he had two men assigned to help him.*

After the initial shock, Marta felt numbed by the news that she had a stepmother. How would Mama feel if she knew she had been so easily replaced? Did Papa ever grieve over her or Elise? She considered writing to him and congratulating him on his marriage, then decided against it. Though she felt no ill will toward the woman, she didn't want to extend good wishes to her father. Instead, she hoped his new wife would be as great a trial to him as he had been to

Mama.

Marta continued to take Lady Daisy to Kew Gardens every day. Lady Daisy knew the name of every plant, when they bloomed, and which had medicinal value. She would lose herself in thought at times, and she'd be silent. They went often to the Palm House with its Pagoda and Syon Vistas and the steam rising from underground boilers into the ornate campanile. The steamy heat soothed Lady Daisy's aching joints and reminded her of India. Marta preferred the Woodland Glade with its deciduous canopy, flowering shrubs and hellebores, primroses and red poppies.

Every season had its delight; winter with its witch hazel and ordered beds of viburnums along the Palm House pond, and snow covering the lawn with white. February brought thousands of purple crocuses peeking up through the grass between the Temple of Bellona and Victoria Gate, and bright yellow daffodils along Broad Walk. In March the cherry trees bloomed and left a carpet of pink and white on the path. April filled the dell with red and purple rhododendrons and magnolias with their plate-size white, waxy blossoms, followed in May by azaleas covering themselves in shawls of peachy-pink and white. The scent of lilacs filled the air. Roses climbed the Pergola and giant water lilies spread out across the pond while laburnum dripped sunlight-yellow streamers in celebration of spring. The tulip and mock orange trees hinted scents of heaven, before autumn came in a burst of color, fading by late November with the advance of winter.

"It's a pity I can't be buried here," Lady Daisy said one day. Death seemed to be on everyone's mind these days, ever since the "unsinkable" *Titanic* had hit an iceberg and sunk on its maiden voyage. Over fourteen hundred lives had been lost in the frigid Atlantic waters. "Of course, I'd rather be buried in India beside Clive. India was like another world with its strange architecture and jungles. It had a scent of spices. Most ladies I met longed to return to England, but I would've been happy to stay forever. I suppose that had everything to do with Clive. I would've been happy in a bedouin tent in the middle of the Sahara."

Lady Daisy hardly said a word the next afternoon as Marta pushed her along in the Broad Walk in Kew Gardens.

"Are you feeling all right, Lady Daisy?"

"Sick at heart. Let's rest by the lily pond." She pulled a thin volume from beneath her blanket and held it out to Marta. "Lord Byron used to be Millicent's favorite poet. She doesn't read him

anymore. Read 'The First Kiss of Love.'" When Marta finished, Lady Daisy sighed wearily. "Again, and with a little more feeling this time."

Marta read the poem again.

"Have you ever been in love, Marta?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why not?"

It seemed an odd question. "It's not something that can be ordered, ma'am."

"You have to be willing."

Marta felt her face heat up. She hoped silence would end such personal inquiries.

"A woman should not go through life without love." Lady Daisy's eyes grew moist. "It's why Millicent is so desperate and bitter now. She thinks all her opportunities are gone. She could still marry, if she had the courage." Lady Daisy sighed heavily. "She has a good education. She's still lovely and can be charming. She has friends. But she has always set such high expectations. Perhaps if she had had Clive's mother to help, but you see, she would have nothing to do with me. I was a pub owner's daughter, nothing more. Millicent thought the lady's heart might soften for her only grandchild. I warned her, but she went anyway. Of course, she was not received."

Lady Daisy fell silent for a long time. Marta didn't know what to say to give her comfort. Her mistress smoothed the blanket over her legs. "It's a pity really. Millicent is like her grandmother in some ways." She gave Marta a bleak smile. "She doesn't approve of me either." She lifted her shoulders. "And, in all truth, no one knows that better than I. But Clive saw something in me and wouldn't take no for an answer."

"I am sorry about Miss Millicent, ma'am." Marta couldn't deny what she had seen with her own eyes. "You are a remarkable mother."

"Less than what I should've been. It's my fault things turned out this way, but if I lived my life all over again, I wouldn't have changed a thing. I wanted him. That's how selfish I am. Besides, if I had done things differently, Millicent wouldn't even exist. I comfort myself by remembering how much Clive loved me. I tell myself he wouldn't have been happy behind a desk overseeing his father's landholdings or sitting in Parliament."

She shook her head sadly. "Millicent met a fine young man when she was sixteen. He was absolutely mad about her. I advised Millicent to marry him. She said he didn't have the proper connections and

therefore would never amount to anything. He's in Parliament now, and married, of course. She saw him with his wife and children in Brighton last summer. That's why she came home so soon. One poor decision can change the entire course of your life."

Marta thought of Mama and Elise. "I know, Lady Daisy. I made a decision once that I will regret for the rest of my life, though I don't know what I could have done to change anything."

Lady Daisy looked pale and upset. "Clive was always the one to call me Milady Daisy, and Welton called me Lady Daisy when he came. I'm not a lady at all, Marta. I'm just plain Daisy. I never knew my father. I grew up in Liverpool and worked in a theater. I was Clive's mistress for a year before he took me off to Gretna Green to make an honest woman of me. Millicent knows enough about my past to think I have nothing good to teach her. I may be lower than a guttersnipe under my nice clothes, but at least I knew quality when I saw it, and I wasn't afraid to grab hold. I knew what I wanted, and what I wanted was Clive Reginald Stockhard!" She gave a broken sob.

"You are a lady. You are as much a lady as my mother was, ma'am."

Lady Daisy leaned forward and grasped Marta's wrist tightly. "What are you waiting for, Marta Schneider?"

Marta started at the question. "I don't know what you mean, ma'am."

"Of course you do." Her hand tightened and her blue eyes glistened with angry tears. "You didn't come to England to be a servant for the rest of your life, did you? You could've done that in Switzerland. A dream brought you here. I knew that the minute I saw your application. I saw in you a girl driven by something. I thought you would only stay for a year or two before you set off to get what you wanted."

Marta's heart pounded heavily. "I am content, ma'am."

"*Content.* Oh, my dear." Lady Daisy's voice softened and became pleading. "I have watched you grieve and punish yourself for nearly six years."

Marta felt the punch of those words. "I should've gone home."

"Why didn't you?"

Because Solange needed her. Because the winter snows had piled up outside the door. Because she had been afraid that if she did, she would never be able to escape.

*"Don't come home again,"* Mama's words whispered in Marta's

mind. She pulled her wrist free and covered her face.

Lady Daisy sat beside her on the park bench. “You have served me faithfully for five years. Soon it will be six. Even with the little you have told me of your mother, I doubt she wanted you to spend the rest of your life as a servant.” She put her hand on Marta’s knee. “I am very fond of you, my dear, and I’m going to give you some advice because I don’t want you to end up like Millicent. She puts a shawl of pride around herself, and life will pass her by.”

“I’m not looking for a husband, ma’am.”

“Well, how could you when you spend six days a week working in the kitchen or taking me on outings and then most of the night reading? You never go anywhere other than church, and you never linger there long enough to meet any young man who might be interested.”

“No one has ever been interested. Men want pretty wives.”

“Charm is deceitful, and beauty never lasts. A man with sense knows that. You have strong character. You are kind. You are honest. You work hard and learn quickly. You left home to better yourself. You may not have formal schooling, but you’ve read the best books in my library. These are qualities a wise man will value.”

“If my father could find nothing about me to love, Lady Daisy, I doubt any other man will.”

“I beg your pardon, Marta, but your father is a fool. Maybe you aren’t beautiful, but you are attractive. A woman’s hair is her glory, my girl, and besides that asset, you have a very fine figure. I’ve seen men look at you. You blush, but it’s true.”

Marta didn’t know what to say.

Lady Daisy laughed. “Millicent would be appalled to hear me speak so bluntly, but if I don’t, you may go on for another five years before you come to your senses.” Lady Daisy folded her hands. “If you want to marry and have children, go to an English colony where there are more men than women. In a place like Canada, a man will see the value of a good woman and not care whether the blood in her veins is blue or red. These are things I have said to my daughter, but she won’t listen. She still dreams of meeting Mr. Darcy.” She shook her head. “Be wise, Marta. Don’t wait. Go down to Liverpool and buy passage on the first ship heading for Canada.”

“And what if my ship hits an iceberg?”

“We’ll pray that doesn’t happen. But if it does, you climb into a life raft and start rowing.”

Marta laughed. She felt exhilarated and afraid at the same time. Canada! She had never even thought of going there. She'd always thought she would return to Switzerland. "I'll leave at the end of the month."

"Good for you." Lady Daisy looked ready to cry. "I'll miss you terribly, of course, but it's for the best." She took out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes and nose. "A pity Millicent hasn't the sense to do it."

## Hoofstuk 10

Marta spaar steeds getrou, maar maak nie meer grootse planne vir haar eie losieshuis nie. Sy probeer Mamma se raad volg en haar seëninge tel. Lady Daisy het diep in haar hart ingekruip en sy geniet dit om haar metgesel te wees. Sy het baie respek en 'n sagte plek vir Enid. Sy hou van Welton en sy het met Gabriella, die nuwe meisie van Italië, vriende gemaak. Marta stel haarself ten doel om Italiaans te leer terwyl sy Gabriella leer Engels praat. Die lewe behandel haar goed in lady Stockhard se huis. Waarom dinge verander?

Marta het Enid se beste resepte versamel en hulle in die boek neergeskryf wat Rosie vir haar gegee het. Sy skryf nie meer so dikwels vir Rosie as gedurende haar eerste drie jaar uit Steffisburg nie. Rosie se briewe kom nog gereeld. Sy praat steeds met groot lof van Arik en skryf bladsye vol oor elke klein verandering in haar klein Henrik. En nou is sy weer swanger. Rosie was nog altyd 'n wonderlike vriendin, maar daar is 'n onbewustelike onsensitiwiteit aan die manier waarop sy haar vreugde deel. Elke keer wanneer Marta een van haar briewe lees, voel dit asof daar sout in haar wonde gevryf word.

Sy kan amper simpatiseer met juffrou Millicent se frustrasie oor haar vrugtelose soektog na 'n geskikte man.

Wanneer Marta Sondae kerk toe gaan, verbeel sy haar elke keer dat Mamma langs haar sit. Sy bid dat die Here Elise se siel genadig sal wees. Alhoewel die drome ná 'n jaar opgehou het, wens sy soms dat hulle wil terugkom, bang dat sy reeds besig is om Mamma en Elise se gesigte te vergeet. Die pyn lê steeds soos 'n swaar klip in haar hart. Af en toe sal die smart onverwags in haar opwel en sy vingers om haar keel slaan totdat dit voel asof sy gaan verstik. Sy huil nooit voor enigiemand nie, maar wag en soek desperaat na iets om haar gedagtes besig te hou. Snags het sy geen verweer nie. In die donker kan sy aan die opgekropte pyn in haar binneste uiting gee.

Wanneer sy nie kan slaap nie, leen sy nog 'n boek uit lady Daisy se versameling.

Die huishouding vlot heerlik wanneer juffrou Millicent op een van haar jagekspedisies is, baie beter as wanneer sy by die huis uitspan.

Marta geniet dit om lady Daisy net vir haarself te hê. Sy kan nie glo dat juffrou Millicent so dwaas kan wees as om haar ma as so vanselfsprekend te aanvaar nie. Lady Daisy is besig om oud te word. Eendag gaan sy nie meer daar wees nie. Wie gaan dan vir juffrou Millicent lief wees?

Twee jaar vlieg verby. Daar is vir Marta sekuriteit in haar roetine. Sy staan soggens vroeg op en help Enid met die ontbyt. Dan help sy Gabriella met die huishouding. Elke middag, reën of sonskyn, neem sy lady Daisy vir haar uitstappie na Kew Gardens. As juffrou Millicent tuis is, is dit arme Gabriella wat herwaarts en derwaarts gestuur word. Marta skryf een maal ’n maand vir Rosie, maar sy het al hoe minder om vir haar vriendin te vertel.

Nadat almal bed toe is, gaan sit Marta dikwels in die biblioteek en lees. Een aand kry lady Daisy haar waar sy voor die rakke staan. “Watter boek het jy laaste gelees?” Sy hou haar hand uit en Marta gee haar die boek wat sy van plan was om terug te sit. “*The Battle for Gaul* deur Julius Caesar.” Sy gee ’n laggie. “Dis nogal swaar leesstof. Definitief nie iets wat ek ooit sou kies nie.” Sy glimlag vir Marta. “Dit was een van Clive se gunstelinge.” Sy gee die boek terug sodat Marta hom kan bêre. Lady Daisy trek ’n dun boek uit ’n rak. “Ek verkies Lord Tennyson se gedigte.” Sy hou die bundel na Marta uit. “Hoekom neem jy hierdie een nie môre saam met jou wanneer ons na die tuine toe gaan nie?”

Na Tennyson sê lady Daisy dat Marta ’n boek moet kies. Ná ’n middag se luister na Charles Darwin se *The Origin of Species* bring lady Daisy *A Tale of Two Cities* saam met haar. Sommige aande sit Marta vir haar en lees. Lady Daisy besluit volgende op sir Walter Scott se *Ivanhoe* en daarna lees hulle Maria Edgeworth se *Castle Rackrent*. Soms is juffrou Millicent so gefrustreerd of verveeld dat sy kom luister.

Marta lees ook wanneer sy ’n oomblik vir haarself het, en loop dikwels met ’n boek in haar voorskootsak.

Rosie stuur ’n brief met verrassende nuus.

> *Die somer ná jou ma se dood het jou pa met ’n vrou van Thun getrou. Ek het nie geweet hoe om dit vir jou te sê nie. Sy bestuur die winkel vir jou pa en as ek my mag verstout om dit te sê, slaag sy nogal daarin om jou pa ook onder beheer te hou. Klaarblyklik het sy vrou kontakte. Sy het toegesien dat hy twee mans aanstel om hom te help.*

Na die aanvanklike skok voel sy afgestomp by die gedagte aan ’n stiefma. Hoe sou Mamma voel as sy geweet het dat sy so maklik vervang is? Het Pappa enigsins oor haar of Elise getreur? Sy oorweeg

dit om vir hom te skryf en geluk te wens met sy huwelik, maar besluit daarteen. Alhoewel sy geen negatiewe gevoelens teenoor die vrou het nie, wil sy nie haar pa gelukwens nie. In plaas daarvan hoop sy dat sy nuwe vrou vir hom net so ’n groot beproewing sal wees as wat hy vir Mamma was.

Marta neem lady Daisy steeds elke dag op hulle uitstappie. Lady Daisy ken die name van al die plante, weet wanneer hulle blom en weet watter medisinale waarde het. Soms raak sy weg in haar gedagtes en word sy stil. Hulle gaan dikwels na die Palm House met sy Pagoda Vistas, waar die stoom wat uit die ondergrondse bronne opwel die versierde kloktoring vul. Die stomende hitte is goed vir lady Daisy se seer gewrigte en herinner haar aan Indië. Marta verkies die woudagtige dal met sy bladwisselende blaredak, blomstruike en nieskruid, primrose en rooi papawers.

Elke seisoen bring sy eie vreugde; die winter met sy bergiepe en netjiese beddings balrose langs die Palm House, en die sneeuwit grasperk. Februarie bring duisende pers krokusse wat deur die gras tussen die Temple of Bellona en Victoria Gate uitloer, en helder geel affodille langs die Broad Walk. Wanneer die kersiebome in Maart blom, laat hulle ’n pienk en wit tapyt op die paadjie. Gedurende April is die dal vol rooi en pers rododendrons en magnolias met hulle wit, wasagtige bloeisels, en in Mei is daar die asaleas in hulle perskepienk sjaals. Die geur van seringblomme hang in die lug. Rankrose klouter teen die Pergola op en reuse waterlelies lê op die water terwyl laburnum die lente met songeel linte vier. Die tulpe en jasmyn bloei met ’n sweempie hemel. Dan kom die herfs met sy ontploffing van kleur wat einde November met die aanvang van die winter vervaag.

“Dis jammer dat ek nie hier begrawe kan word nie,” sê Lady Daisy op ’n dag. Dis asof die dood die afgelope tyd in almal se gedagtes is, veral sedert die “onsinkbare” Titanic ’n ysberg getref het en op sy nooiensvaart gesink het. Meer as 1 400 lewens is deur die ysige water van die Atlantiese Oseaan opgeëis. “Vanselfsprekend sou ek eerder in Indië langs Clive begrawe wou word. Indië was soos ’n ander wêreld met sy vreemde argitektuur en oerwoude. Daar was oral die geur van speserye. Die meeste dames wat ek ontmoet het, wou graag terugkom Engeland toe, maar ek sou nie omgegee het om vir altyd daar te bly nie. Ek veronderstel dit het alles met Clive te doen gehad. Ek sou gelukkig in ’n Bedoeïene-tent in die middel van die Sahara gewees het.”

Die volgende middag sê lady Daisy skaars ’n woord terwyl Marta

haar al langs die Broad Walk in Kew Gardens stoot.

"Is daar iets fout, lady Daisy?"

"Ek's hartseer. Kom ons gaan rus by die leliedammetjie." Sy haal 'n kleinerige boekie uit haar kombers en gee dit vir Marta. "Lord Byron was altyd Millicent se gunsteling digter, maar sy lees nie meer sy werk nie. Lees 'The First Kiss of Love'." Toe Marta klaar is, gee lady Daisy 'n moeë sug. "Weer, en hierdie keer met 'n bietjie meer gevoel."

Marta lees die gedig weer.

"Was jy al ooit verlief, Marta?"

"Nee, Mevrou."

"Hoekom nie?"

Die vraag vang haar onkant. "Dis nie iets wat 'n mens kan besluit nie, Mevrou."

"'n Mens moet gewillig wees."

Marta voel haar wange warm word. Sy hoop dat haar swye 'n einde aan hierdie persoonlike vrae sal bring.

"'n Vrou moenie sonder 'n liefde deur die lewe gaan nie." Lady Daisy se oë raak vogtig. "Dis waarom Millicent so desperaat en bitter is. Sy dink al haar geleenthede is verby. Sy kan steeds trou as sy die moed het." Lady Daisy sug swaar. "Sy het 'n goeie opvoeding. Sy is steeds mooi en kan sjarmant wees. Sy het vriende. Maar sy het nog altyd hoë verwagtings gekoester. As sy iemand soos Clive se ma gehad het om haar te help ... Maar die vrou wou niks met my te doen gehad het nie. Ek was 'n kroegeienaar se dogter, niks meer nie. Millicent het gedink dat die dame se hart teenoor haar enigste kleindogter sou versag. Ek het haar gewaarsku, maar sy het in elk geval gegaan. Haar ouma het geweier om haar te ontvang."

Lady Daisy bly lank stil. Marta weet nie wat om te sê om haar te troos nie. Haar werkgewer stryk oor haar kniekombersie. "Dit is regtig 'n jammerte. In sommige opsigte is Millicent haar ouma se kind." Sy glimlag flou. "Sy vind ook fout met my." Sy haal haar skouers op. "En om die waarheid te sê, niemand weet dit so goed soos ek nie. Maar Clive het iets in my gesien en het nie nee vir 'n antwoord aanvaar nie."

"Ek is jammer oor juffrou Millicent, Mevrou." Marta kan nie ontken wat sy met haar eie oë gesien het nie. "U is 'n merkwaardige ma."

"Minder as wat ek moes gewees het. Dis my skuld dat dinge so uitgewerk het, maar as ek my lewe kon oorhê, sou ek niks verander het nie. Ek wou hom hê. Dis hoe selfsugtig ek is. En buitendien, as ek dinge anders gedoen het, sou Millicent nie eens bestaan het nie. Ek

troos myself met die wete van hoe lief Clive vir my was. Ek sê vir myself dat dit hom nie sou gelukkig maak om in ’n kantoor na sy pa se beleggings om te sien of in die parlement te sit nie.”

Sy skud haar kop hartseer. “Millicent het ’n oulike jong man ontmoet toe sy 16 was. Hy was gaande oor haar. Ek het Millicent aangeraai om met hom te trou. Sy het gesê dat hy nie die regte kontakte gehad het nie en nêrens in die lewe sou kom nie. Hy is nou in die parlement en getroud. Sy het hom en sy vrou en kinders verlede somer in Brighton gesien. Dis waarom sy so gou huis toe gekom het. Een swak besluit kan ’n mens se hele lewenskoers verander.”

Marta dink aan Mamma en Elise. “Ek weet, lady Daisy. Ek het op ’n keer ’n besluit geneem wat ek vir die res van my lewe sal berou. Al weet ek nie wat ek sou kon doen om enigiets te verander nie.”

Lady Daisy lyk bleek en ongelukkig. “Clive het my altyd Milady Daisy genoem, en toe Welton hier aankom, het hy my lady Daisy genoem. Ek is glad nie ’n lady nie, Marta. Ek’s net doodgewoon Daisy. Ek het nooit my pa geken nie. Ek het in Liverpool grootgeword en in ’n teater gewerk. Ek was vir ’n jaar lank Clive se minnares voordat hy my na Gretna Green toe geneem het en ’n respektabele vrou van my gemaak het. Millicent weet genoeg van my verlede om te dink dat ek niks goeds het om haar te leer nie. Ek is dalk laer as ’n gopsenaar onder my mooi klere, maar ek herken iets goeds wanneer ek dit sien, en ek was nie bang om dit aan te gryp nie. Ek het geweet wat ek wou hê, en wat ek wou hê, was Clive Reginald Stockhard!” Sy gee ’n gebroke snik.

“U is ’n lady. U is net so ’n lady soos wat my ma was, Mevrou.”

Lady Daisy leun vooroor en haar vingers sluit styf om Marta se gewrig. “Waarvoor wag jy, Marta Schneider?”

Die vraag vang haar onkant. “Ek weet nie wat u bedoel nie, Mevrou?”

“Natuurlik weet jy.” Haar hand verstyf en haar blou oë is vol kwaai trane. “Jy het nie Engeland toe gekom om vir die res van jou lewe ’n bediende te wees nie. Jy kon dit in Switserland gedoen het. ’n Droom het jou hiernatoe gebring. Ek het dit geweet die oomblik toe ek jou aansoek sien. Ek het ’n gedrewe meisie gesien. Ek het gedink dat jy net ’n jaar of twee sou bly voordat jy sou weggaan om jou drome na te jaag.”

Marta se hart klop swaar. “Ek is tevrede, Mevrou.”

“*Tevrede*. Ai, my skat.” Lady Daisy se stem versag en word pleitend. “Ek kyk nou al vir ses jaar toe hoe jy treur en jouself straf.”

Die woorde is in die kol en seer. “Ek moes huis toe gegaan het.”

“Hoekom het jy nie?”

Want Solange het haar nodig gehad. Want die wintersneeu het swaar geval. Want sy was bang dat as sy sou teruggaan huis toe, sy nooit weer sou kon ontsnap nie.

“*Moenie weer huis toe kom nie,*” fluister Mamma se woorde in haar gedagtes. Sy maak haar gewrig los en hou haar hande oor haar gesig.

Lady Daisy sit langs haar op die bankie. “Jy het my vyf jaar lank getrou gedien. Binnekort sal dit ses wees. Selfs met die klein bietjie wat jy my van jou ma vertel het, dink ek nie sy sou wou hê dat jy vir die res van jou lewe in ander mense se huise werk nie.” Sy sit haar hand op Marta se knie. “Jy het diep in my hart ingekruip, my skat, en ek wil jou raad gee omdat ek nie wil hê dat jy dieselfde paadjie as Millicent moet loop nie. Sy het ’n mantel van trots om haar gehang en nou is die lewe besig om by haar verby te gaan.”

“Ek is nie op soek na ’n man nie, Mevrou.”

“Hoe kan jy dan ook as jy ses dae ’n week in die kombuis werk of my op uitstappies neem en elke aand lees? Jy gaan nooit iewers anders heen as kerk toe nie, en jy bly nooit lank genoeg om ’n jong man te ontmoet wat dalk in jou sal belangstel nie.”

“Niemand het al ooit belanggestel nie. Mans soek mooi vroue.”

“Sjarme is bedrieglik en skoonheid vergaan. ’n Intelligente man weet dit. Jy is karaktervas. Jy is goedhartig. Jy is eerlik. Jy werk hard en leer vinnig. Jy het die huis verlaat om jouself te verbeter. Jy het dalk nie formele opleiding nie, maar jy het die beste boeke in my versameling gelees. Enige wyse man sal hierdie eienskappe raaksien.”

“As my pa niks in my kon kry om lief te hê nie, lady Daisy, twyfel ek of enige ander man sal.”

“Verskoon my, Marta, maar jou pa is ’n dwaas. Dalk is jy nie beeldskoon nie, maar jy is aantreklik. ’n Vrou se hare is haar kroon, my skat, en buiten daardie bate het jy ’n baie mooi figuur. Ek het al gesien hoe die mans na jou kyk. Jy bloos, maar dis die waarheid.”

Marta weet nie wat om te sê nie.

Lady Daisy lag. “Millicent sal ’n toeval kry as sy my so reguit hoor praat, maar as ek stilbly, gaan jy dalk nog vyf jaar so aanhou voordat jy tot jou sinne kom.” Lady Daisy vou haar hande. “As jy wil trou en kinders hê, moet jy na ’n Engelse kolonie toe gaan waar daar meer mans as vroue is. In ’n plek soos Kanada sal ’n man die waarde van ’n goeie vrou raaksien en nie omgee of die bloed in haar are blou of rooi is nie. Ek het hierdie goed al vir my dogter gesê, maar sy wil nie

luister nie. Sy droom steeds daarvan om Jane Austin se Mr. Darcy te ontmoet." Sy skud haar kop.

"Wees slim, Marta. Moenie wag nie. Gaan Liverpool toe en koop 'n kaartjie vir die eerste skip Kanada toe."

"En wat as my skip 'n ysberg tref?"

"Ons bid dat dit nie gebeur nie. Maar as dit gebeur, klim jy op 'n reddingsbootjie en begin roei."

Marta lag. Sy voel gelyktydig opgewonde en bang. Kanada! Sy het Kanada nog nooit eens as 'n bestemming oorweeg nie. Sy het altyd gedink dat sy weer Switserland toe sal gaan. "Ek sal aan die einde van die maand so maak."

"Mooi, my kind." Lady Daisy lyk asof sy gaan huil. "Ek gaan jou verskriklik mis, maar dit is beter so." Sy haal 'n sakdoekie uit en klad oor haar oë en neus. "Dis jammer dat Millicent nie die verstand het om dit te doen nie."

## Chapter 11

**1912**

Four days passed in abject misery, but gradually, Marta gained her sea legs and felt well enough to leave her bunk in steerage, venturing onto the deck of the SS *Laurentic*. Her first sight of the vast open sea with waves catching the sunlight filled her with terror. The ship that had appeared so enormous in Liverpool now seemed small and vulnerable as it steamed west toward Canada.

She thought of the *Titanic*, so much bigger than this humble vessel, and how it had gone to the bottom of the ocean. The owners of the *Titanic* had bragged that the ship was invincible, unsinkable. Who in his right mind would make such a boast? It flew in the face of God, like the foolish people who built the tower of Babel, thinking they could climb to heaven on their own achievements.

Marta gazed over the rail, passengers lined up on both sides of her like seagulls on a pier. The air felt cold enough to freeze her lungs. She was afloat on a cork bobbing on the surface of a vast sea with bottomless depths. Would this ship come near any icebergs? She had read that what was seen on the surface was a mere fraction of the danger hidden below.

Stomach queasy, Marta closed her eyes so she wouldn't see the rise and fall of the horizon. She didn't want to go back inside to her bunk. The accommodations had turned out to be far worse than she had expected. The cacophony of voices speaking German, Hungarian, Greek, and Italian made her head ache. People fresh off farms and from small villages submitted with docile ignorance to being treated like cattle, but Marta minded greatly. If two hundred people had paid passage in steerage, then two hundred people should have a place to sit and eat and not have to find space on the floor or the windblown deck. Rather than be served, a "captain" was chosen to fetch the food for eight to ten others. And then, each passenger was required to wash his own "gear"—the tin saucepan, dipper, fork, and spoon she had found on her bunk the day she boarded the ship.

She breathed in the salt air. Despite her attempts to keep clean, her shirtwaist smelled faintly of vomit. If it rained, she might just take out a bar of soap and wash right here on the deck, clothes on!

The ship surged up and dipped down, making her stomach roll. She clenched her teeth, refusing to be sick again. Her clothes hung on her. She couldn't go forever on so little food and still have her health

when she arrived in Montreal. After spending an hour waiting to use one of the washbasins so she could clean her gear and then finding it in such fetid condition, she had almost lost the cold porridge she had managed to get down that morning. She lost her temper instead. Shoving her way through a group of Croatians and Dalmatians, she marched to the gangway, intending to take her complaints to the captain himself. A master-at-arms blocked her way. She shouted at him to move aside. He shoved her back. Sneering, he told her she could write a letter to management and mail it when she arrived in Canada.

At least the boiling anger helped her forget the misery of *mal de mer*.

Now, clutching the rail, Marta prayed God would keep her on her feet and keep what little food she'd eaten in her stomach. *Please, Lord Jesus, bring us safely across the Atlantic.*

She cast any thought of ever getting on another ship into the undulating sea. She would never see Switzerland again. Tears streaked her cheeks at the realization.

By the time the ship entered the Saint Lawrence Seaway, Marta felt rested and eager to find her way around Montreal. Handing over her papers, she spoke French to the officer. He gave her directions to the International Quarter. Shouldering her pack, she took a trolley and walked to the Swiss Consulate. The clerk added her name to the employment register and gave her directions to an immigration home for girls. Marta purchased a newspaper the next morning and began looking for employment opportunities on her own. She bought a map of Montreal and began a systematic exploration of the city. She spoke to proprietors and left applications, and she found a part-time position in a garment shop in downtown Montreal a few blocks from the Orpheum Theatre.

Expanding her exploration, she came across a large house for sale on Union Street near the railroad. When she knocked, no one answered. She peered in the dirty windows and saw an empty parlor. She wrote down the property agent's information and then walked up and down the street, knocking on doors and asking neighbors about the house. It had been a boardinghouse for women, and not the sort of women who would be welcome in any decent home. Railroad men came and went. The roof had been replaced four years ago, and the house had solid foundations as far as anyone knew. A woman had been murdered in one of the bedrooms. The house shut down shortly

afterward and had stood vacant for eighteen months.

Marta went to the Records Office and learned the name of the property owner, who now lived in Tadoussac. She spent Saturday walking and thinking. Excitement welled up inside her at the thought of her goal being within reach. On Sunday, she went to church and prayed God would open the way for her to buy the house on Union Street. The next morning, she went to the property agent's office just down the street from the garment shop and made an appointment with Monsieur Sherbrooke to see the inside of the house later that afternoon. He seemed dubious of her intent and said he had little time to satisfy someone's idle curiosity. Marta assured him she had the resources to make an offer, if the house turned out to be what she wanted.

She hired a ride to Union Street and found Monsieur Sherbrooke waiting at the front door. As soon as he ushered her in, Marta thought of Mama. She had been the first one to believe in her. *"You have set your heart on a mountaintop, Marta, but I have seen you climb. You will use everything you are learning to good purpose. I know this. I have faith in you, and I have faith in God to take you wherever He wills."* She had laughed and cupped Marta's face. *"Maybe you will run a shop or manage a hotel in Interlaken."*

Monsieur Sherbrooke began talking. Marta ignored him as she walked through the large parlor, dining room, and kitchen with a sizable pantry with empty shelves. She pointed out the rat droppings to Monsieur Sherbrooke.

"Shall we go upstairs?" He walked back toward the entry hall and stairs.

Marta ignored his lead and headed down the hallway behind the stairs. "There should be a room back here."

He came quickly down the stairs. "Just a storage room, mademoiselle."

Marta opened the door to the room that would share a common wall with the parlor. She gasped at the red, green, and yellow *chinoiserie* wallpaper covering all four walls. Monsieur Sherbrooke stepped quickly around her. "The servant's quarters."

With private bath? She looked in at the pink, green, and black tiled walls and floor, claw-foot tub, and water closet. "Whoever owned this house must have treated his servants very well."

He stood in the middle of the room, pointing out the brass wall sconces and elegant gaslight hanging above.

Marta looked at the floor. “What is that stain you’re standing on?”

“Water.” He stepped aside. “But as you can see, there’s no serious damage.”

Marta shuddered inwardly.

Monsieur Sherbrooke headed for the door. “There are four bedrooms on the second floor and two more on the third.”

Marta followed him, walking around inside each room, opening and closing windows. The two bedrooms on the third floor were very small, with slanted ceilings and dormer windows, and in winter they would be very cold.

Monsieur Sherbrooke ushered her downstairs. “It’s a wonderful house, with a good location near the railroad and well worth the price.”

Marta gave Monsieur Sherbrooke a dubious look. “It needs considerable work.” She enumerated the costs she would have to bear in making repairs and getting the house ready for habitation before making her offer, considerably lower than the asking price.

“Mademoiselle!” He sighed in exasperation. “You cannot expect me to take such an offer seriously!”

“Indeed, I do, monsieur. Furthermore, you have a moral obligation to inform Monsieur Charpentier of my offer.”

His eyes flickered and then narrowed as he looked her over from head to foot, reconsidering her. “Do I understand you correctly, mademoiselle, that you know the owner, Monsieur Charpentier?”

“No, monsieur, but I do know what went on inside this house and why it has stood vacant for eighteen months. The stain you were standing on in that back bedroom is not water, but blood, as you well know. Tell Monsieur Charpentier I can pay the full amount I’ve offered. I doubt he will receive a better bid.” She handed him a slip of paper with the garment shop’s address. “This is where I can be reached.” She decided to press for whatever advantage she could. “If I don’t hear from you by the end of the week, I have another property in mind. Unfortunately, it is not one of your listings. Good day, monsieur.” She left him standing in the entry hall.

A messenger arrived at the shop on Wednesday. “Monsieur Charpentier accepts your offer.”

As soon as the papers were signed and title received, Marta quit her job in the garment shop and moved into the house on Union Street. She bought pots, pans, dishes, and flatware and left everything

in boxes until she finished scouring the stove, counters, and worktable and scrubbing out cabinets and pantry. She set to work scrubbing the floors, sills, and windows. She found a wholesaler and bought material for curtains. She watched personal ads and furnished the rooms with bargain-priced beds, dressers, and armoires and the parlor with two sofas, two pairs of wing chairs, and side tables. She bought a long dining table and twelve chairs at an auction, adding lamps and a few rugs.

It took six weeks and everything she had to get the house ready. She paid for a small ad in the newspaper:

Room for rent. Spacious. Quiet neighborhood close to the locomotive works.

She posted a notice on the church bulletin board and hung a Vacancy sign in the front window. She framed and hung the house rules on the foyer wall:

Rent due the first of the month
Linens changed weekly
Breakfast served at 6 a.m.
Dinner served at 6 p.m.
No meals on Sunday

With the last of her money, she invited her neighbors to a Saturday afternoon high tea. As she served Ceylon tea, apple *Streusel* cake, chocolate *éclairs*, and spicy chicken sandwiches, she announced that her boardinghouse was open to renters.

The evening after the newspaper came out, Howard Basler, a railroad man, showed up at the front door. "I don't need much space." He rented an attic bedroom. A railroader's wife, Carleen Kildare, came with her two small boys to ask if Marta could accommodate a family. She showed Carleen two adjoining bedrooms on the second floor with a bathroom between. Carleen brought her husband, Nally, back that evening, and they said they would move in at the end of the month. Four bachelors, all railroad men, doubled up in the last two available rooms on the third floor. Once Marta covered the bloodstain with a rug, she slept quite comfortably in the downstairs bedroom.

Only one small third-floor bedroom remained vacant.

One of the neighbors mentioned Marta's high tea to Carleen, and the boarders teased her about when they might be served like English lords and ladies. Marta told them she'd serve them all high tea on Saturday and they could talk then about whether it would become a regular event. As she served egg and cucumber sandwiches, Welsh

rabbit fingers, honey spice cake, and strawberry tarts, she told them how much she would have to raise their rent to give them this added service. After a few bites, everyone agreed.

The income exceeded Marta's expectations.

So did the work.

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*Warner told me the truth when he said I would work harder than I ever have in my life running my own boardinghouse. I am up before dawn and fall into bed long after everyone has retired.*

*Carleen Kildare offered to do the laundry if I could give her and her husband, Nally, a discount on their rent. I agreed. She works when Gilley and Ryan are napping. She also helps me prepare high tea on Saturdays. Enid's Dundee cake is always a great success, as is Herr Becker's Schokoladenkuchen. I have to hide the second cake or I would have nothing to offer at the fellowship hour after Sunday services.*

*I received my second marriage proposal from Mr. Michaelson this morning. He is one of the five bachelors living in my house. He is forty-two and a pleasant enough gentleman, but I am content as I am. If he persists, I shall have to raise his rent.*

Marta took off one day a week and spent half of it at the German Lutheran Church. She liked to sit near the back, observing people as they entered. A tall, well-dressed man came every Sunday and sat two aisles in front of her. He had broad shoulders and blond hair. He never came to the fellowship hour after services. Once, when she came outside after services, she saw him shaking hands with Howard Basler. She saw the gentleman again a few days later walking along Union Street.

Lady Daisy wrote to her.

*I am delighted to hear you have attained your goal of owning a boardinghouse. I told Millicent you received a proposal already, but she refuses to be persuaded.*

One morning after a winter storm had dumped three feet of snow on Montreal and the autumn mud had frozen, someone knocked on Marta's front door. Since boarders had their own keys, she ignored the interruption and went on adding up expenses. When the knock came again, louder this time, she left her books, expecting to find some poor, half-frozen door-to-door salesman outside her front door. A flurry of snowflakes drifted in when Marta opened the door.

A tall man stood on the porch, swathed in a heavy overcoat, scarf pulled up over the lower part of his face and his hat pulled down. He didn't have a sample case. *"Ich heiße* Niclas Waltert.*"* As he touched the brim of his hat, snow slipped off the rim. *"Mir würde gesagt, Sie haben ein Zimmer zu vermieten."* He spoke High German with a northern accent and had the manner of an educated gentleman.

"Yes. I have a room for rent. I'm Marta Schneider. Please." She stepped back. "Come in." She motioned when he hesitated. *"Schnell!"* Wood and coal cost far too much, and she didn't want all the warmth going out the front door.

Removing his hat and coat, he shook them both free of snow and stomped his feet before stepping inside. She wished her boarders showed such courtesy.

Marta's heart leaped when she looked up into eyes as clear and blue as the *Thunersee* in spring. "I see you at church every Sunday." She felt her face heat up as soon as the words escaped.

He apologized in German and said he didn't speak much English.

Embarrassed, she told him she had one small attic room available and asked if he would like to see it.

He said yes, please.

Heart thumping, she thought if he saw the parlor and dining room first, and knew about the high tea served each Saturday, he might be more tempted. He didn't say anything. She took him upstairs and opened the door to the empty bedroom. The room had a narrow bed, dresser, and kerosene lamp. There wasn't room for a chair, but there was a bench under the dormer window that overlooked Union Street. When Niclas Waltert stepped in, he bumped his head on the slanted ceiling. He gave a soft laugh and drew the curtains aside to look out.

"Where do you work, Herr Waltert?" When he looked back at her, she felt a fluttering in her stomach.

"I'm an engineer at the Baldwin Locomotive Works. How much for the room?"

She told him. "I'm sorry I don't have better accommodations to offer you. I think the room is too small for you."

He looked around again and came back to the door. He took his passport from his pocket, removed several bills he had hidden there, and held them out. He had long, tapering fingers like an artist. "I will be back early this evening, if that will be convenient."

Her fingers trembled as she folded the bills into her apron pocket.

"Dinner is at six, Herr Waltert." She led the way downstairs and stood in the front hallway while he took his woolen scarf from the hook and wrapped it around his neck. He shrugged into his coat and buttoned it. Everything he did seemed methodical and full of masculine grace. When he took his hat from the hook, she opened the door. He stepped over the threshold and then turned back, tapping his hat lightly against his side. "Will I meet your husband this evening?"

An odd, quivery sensation spread through her limbs. "It's *Fräulein,* Herr Waltert. I have no husband."

He gave her a polite bow. "Fräulein." Putting on his hat, he went down the front steps. As she closed the door, Marta realized she was trembling.

* * *

Niclas arrived in time for dinner and sat at the far end of the table. He listened, but he didn't join in the dinner table conversation. Nally and Carleen Kildare had their hands full that night with Gilley and Ryan, and Marta worried Herr Waltert would find them annoying. But he called them by name and performed a trick with two spoons that had both children awed. "Do it again!" they yelled. When his gaze met hers, her heart flipped over.

After dinner, the men moved into the parlor to play cards. The Kildares went upstairs to get their boys ready for bed. Marta picked up the empty meat platter, all too aware of Niclas Waltert lingering in his seat. "Don't you have a servant to help you, Fräulein?"

She gave a short laugh. "I'm the only servant in this house, Herr Waltert." She set an empty vegetable dish on the platter and reached for another. "Carleen helps with the washing. Other than that, I manage to get things done."

"You're a fine cook."

*"Danke."* When she came back from the kitchen, she found Niclas stacking the other dishes at the end of the table nearest the kitchen. "You don't have to do that!"

He stepped back. "I thought I should do something of use before asking a favor, Fräulein Schneider."

"What favor?" She picked up the dishes.

"I must learn English. I understand enough to do my job, but not enough to carry on a conversation with the other boarders. Would you be willing to teach me? I would pay you for your time, of course."

The thought of spending time with him pleased her greatly, though she hoped it didn't show too much. "Of course, and you

needn’t pay me. People helped me learn and asked nothing for it. When would you like to start?”

“This evening?”

“I’ll come to the parlor when I’ve finished the dishes.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Marta stood in the kitchen doorway and watched him leave the room.

It took an hour to wash the pots, pans, and dishes and put everything away. She wondered if Niclas Waltert had given up and gone upstairs. She heard the men talking over cards as she came down the hall. When she entered the parlor, Niclas stood and set his book aside. When she came closer, she saw it was a Bible, with *Niclas Bernhard Waltert* engraved in gold on the black leather cover. “You are a religious man, Herr Waltert?”

He smiled slightly. “My father intended me for the church, but I learned early I was not suited to the life of a minister. Please.” He stretched out his hand, inviting her to sit. Marta realized he would not take his seat until she was comfortably settled in hers. No man had ever treated her so respectfully.

“How are you not suited?”

“A minister’s life belongs to his flock.”

“Our lives belong to God whether we’re in church or outside it, Herr Waltert, or so my mother taught me.”

“Some are called to greater sacrifice, and some things I was unwilling to give up.”

“Such as?”

“A wife, Fräulein, and children.”

Her heart raced. “It is a Catholic priest who can’t marry, not a Lutheran minister.”

“Yes, but the family forfeits for the sake of others.”

He fell silent. When she met his gaze, she was frightened by the feelings he stirred in her. *Is this what Rosie felt when she looked at Arik? or what Lady Daisy felt for her Clive?* Marta glanced away, lifted her chin, and looked back at him. “Shall we begin our lessons?”

“Anytime you wish, Fräulein.”

Marta found Niclas waiting for her in the parlor every evening after dinner. While the other Canadian bachelors played cards, she taught Niclas English.

“Mr. Waltert seems quite taken with you,” Carleen said one day while gathering the sheets for washing.

"He asked me to teach him English."

She laughed as she piled the sheets in her arms. "Well, that was a handy excuse."

"As soon as Herr Waltert learns enough to carry on a conversation, he'll be playing cards with the other men."

"Not if the way he looks at you tells me anything."

"He doesn't look at me in that way, Carleen."

"You're saying you don't like him?"

Embarrassed, Marta gathered the rest of the sheets and stuffed them into a basket. "I like him as well as any of my other boarders."

Carleen grinned. "You never blushed when Davy Michaelson looked at you."

* * *

"I don't have your gift of languages, Fräulein. I'm not sure I will ever learn."

"No German, remember," Marta insisted. "English only."

"English is a difficult language."

"Anything worth learning is difficult."

"Why can't we just talk in German for a while?"

"Because you won't learn English that way."

"I want . . . learn more . . . you," Niclas said in faltering English.

Clearly frustrated, he switched to German. "I want to find out if we are suited to one another."

He could not have said anything more shocking. She opened her mouth and closed it again.

"I can see I've surprised you. Let's dispense with English for now so I can speak clearly. I want to court you."

Marta raised her hands to cover her burning cheeks. Davy Michaelson looked toward them while the others spoke in low voices. Quickly regaining her composure, Marta lowered her hands and clenched them in her lap. "Why would a man like you want to court someone like me?"

Niclas looked astonished. "Why? Because you're an extraordinary young woman. Because I admire you. Because . . ." His gaze caressed her face and drifted down over the rest of her in a way that made her body go hot all over. "I like everything I see and know about you."

Was this what love did to a person? Turned her inside out and upside down? "I'm your landlord."

His mouth tipped. "Do I have to move out to court you?"

"No." She spoke so quickly she felt the heat flood her face.

“I mean . . .” She couldn’t think of anything coherent to say.

“Will you attend church with me this Sunday, Marta?”

He had never used her given name before. Flustered, she let out a soft breath. “We’re in church together every week.”

His expression softened. “I go. You go. We don’t go together. I want you to walk with me. I want you to sit beside me.”

Feeling entirely too vulnerable, she looked for escape. She knew if she said no, he would never ask again. She would end up like Miss Millicent, living in regret for the rest of her life. Hadn’t she come to Canada on the slim chance she might find a suitable husband? Niclas Waltert was far more than suitable.

He searched her eyes. “What troubles you?”

That he would find her unworthy, that after a while he would see she wasn’t suitable at all. She hadn’t even gone to high school—and he was an engineer. He was handsome. She was plain. He was cultured. She was the daughter of a tailor.

She searched her mind frantically and blurted out the first excuse that came to mind. “I don’t even know how old you are.”

“Thirty-seven. Not too old for you, I hope.”

She stared at the pulse beating rapidly in his throat. “No. No, you aren’t too old.” When she raised her eyes, she saw light come into his as he smiled.

“Then you will come with me this Sunday? *Ja?*”

“Yes.” She gave a prim nod. She glanced at the mantel clock. “It’s getting late. I think we can dispense with our English lessons.”

Niclas stood and held out his hand. As she stood, her hand in his, she knew she would go anywhere with him, even a bedouin tent in the middle of the Sahara.

# Hoofstuk 11

## 1912

Ná vier dae se diepe ellende begin Marta haar seebene vind en voel sy gesond genoeg om haar kajuit in die tussendek te verlaat en dit op die dek van die SS Laurentic te waag. Haar eerste blik op die eindelose oop see en die golwe waarin die sonlig skitter, vul haar met ontsetting. Die skip wat so reusagtig in Liverpool gelyk het, voel nou skielik klein en weerloos.

Sy dink aan die Titanic, soveel groter as hierdie beskeie vaartuig, en hoe dit na die seebodem gesink het. Die eienaars van die Titanic het gespog dat die skip onvernietigbaar en onsinkbaar was. Watter mens met gesonde verstand sou so 'n uitspraak waag? Hulle het die Here uitgetart, nes die dwase mense wat die toring van Babel gebou het en gedink het dat hulle eie prestasies hulle bo in die hemel sou uitbring.

Marta tuur oor die reling. Aan weerskante van haar staan die ander passasiers soos seemeeue wat op 'n hawemuur ingeryg is. Die lug voel koud genoeg om haar longe te verys. Sy bevind haar op 'n stukkie kurk wat op die oppervlakte van 'n uitgestrekte see met bodemlose dieptes dobber. Gaan hulle naby enige ysberge kom? Sy het gelees dat dit wat bokant die water gesien kan word, net 'n fraksie van die gevaar onder die oppervlak is.

Marta baklei teen die naarheid op haar maag en sluit haar oë sodat sy nie kan sien hoe die horison styg en val nie. Sy wil nie weer na haar kajuit toe gaan nie. Die akkommodasie is baie swakker as wat sy verwag het. Haar kop is seer van die aanhoudende kakofonie van Duitse, Hongaarse, Griekse en Italiaanse stemme. Mense vars uit die platteland blyk tevrede te wees om soos plaasdiere behandel te word. Maar vir Marta is dit nie aanvaarbaar nie. As 200 mense vir hulle oorvaart betaal het, behoort 200 mense plek te hê om te sit en eet, en nie verplig te wees om na slaapplek op die vloer of die winderige dek te soek nie. Eerder as om bedien te word is daar 'n "kaptein" aangewys om die kos vir agt tot tien ander passasiers te gaan haal. En

dan word daar van elkeen verwag om sy of haar eie eetgerei te was – die blikbord, beker, vurk en lepel wat sy die eerste dag op haar slaapbank aangetref het.

Sy asem die soutlug in. Ondanks haar pogings om skoon te bly ruik haar bloesie vaagweg na braaksel. As dit reën, sal sy sommer ’n koekie seep kry en haar hier op die dek was, klere en al!

Haar maag draai toe die skip weer ’n hoë deining klim. Sy weier om weer naar te word en byt op haar tande. Haar klere hang aan haar. Sy kan nie vir altyd so aangaan en gesond wees wanneer sy in Montreal aankom nie. Nadat sy ’n uur lank gewag het om een van die wasbalies te gebruik sodat sy haar eetgerei kon was, het sy dit in so ’n vieslike toestand aangetref dat sy amper die koue pap opgebring het wat sy die oggend afgesluk kon kry. In plaas daarvan het sy haar humeur verloor. Sy het haar weg deur ’n groep Kroate en Dalmasiërs gebaan met die doel om haar klagtes na die kaptein self te neem. ’n Skeepsprovoos het haar voorgekeer. Sy het gegil dat hy vir haar moes plek maak en hy het haar teruggestamp. Hy het smalend laat hoor dat sy ’n brief kon skryf en pos wanneer sy in Kanada aankom.

Ten minste het die siedende woede haar gehelp om die ellende van die *mal de mer* te vergeet.

Waar Marta nou aan die reling vashou, bid sy dat die Here haar staande sal hou, en die kos wat sy geëet het, in haar maag sal hou. *Asseblief, Here Jesus, gee dat ons veilig in Kanada sal aankom*.

Sy verwerp enige gedagte aan ’n volgende vaart oor die deinende see. Sy sal Switserland nooit weer sien nie. Trane loop oor haar wange by die besef.

Teen die tyd dat die skip die Saint Lawrence-seeweg bereik, voel Marta uitgerus en gretig om Montreal te begin verken. Sy praat Frans toe sy haar dokumente aan die beampte oorhandig. Hy beduie vir haar waar die verskillende ambassades geleë is. Sy swaai haar sak oor haar skouer, neem ’n bus en loop na die Switserse konsulaat toe. Die klerk skryf haar naam op die werkregister en gee haar aanwysings na die immigrasietehuis vir meisies. Die volgende oggend koop Marta ’n koerant en begin met haar eie soektog na werk. Sy koop ’n kaart van Montreal en begin die stad sistematies verken. Sy praat met winkeleienaars en laat haar aansoeke by besighede en kry ’n deeltydse pos in ’n klerewinkel in die middestad, ’n paar blokke van die Orpheumteater af.

By verdere verkenning ontdek sy ’n te koop-bordjie voor ’n groot huis in Unionstraat naby die treinspoor. Daar is geen antwoord toe sy

klop nie. Sy tuur deur die vuil vensters en sien ’n leë sitkamer. Nadat sy die eiendomsagent se inligting neergeskryf het, gaan klop sy by ander woonplekke in die straat aan om die mense oor die huis uit te vra. Dit was ’n losieshuis vir vroue, maar nie die soort vroue wat in enige ordentlike huis sou welkom wees nie. Spoorwegmanne het gekom en gegaan. Die dak is vier jaar gelede vervang en sover hulle weet, staan die huis op ’n soliede fondament. ’n Vrou is in een van die kamers vermoor en kort daarna is die huis gesluit. Dit staan nou al vir 18 maande leeg.

Marta gaan na die registrasiekantoor waar sy die naam van die eienaar kry. Dié woon nou in Tadoussac. Sy loop die hele Saterdag en dink. Die idee dat haar doelwit begin vorm aanneem, maak dat die opwinding in haar bruis. Sy gaan Sondag kerk toe en bid dat die Here dit vir haar sal moontlik maak om die huis in Unionstraat te koop. Die volgende oggend besoek sy die eiendomsagent se kantoor in dieselfde straat as die klerewinkel en maak ’n afspraak met monsieur Sherbrooke om later die middag na die huis te gaan kyk. Hy lyk nie so seker van haar intensies nie en sê hy het nie tyd om iemand se ydel nuuskierigheid te bevredig nie. Marta verseker hom dat sy die geld het om ’n aanbod te maak indien die huis is wat sy wil hê.

Sy neem ’n huurmotor na Unionstraat waar monsieur Sherbrooke haar by die voordeur inwag. Toe hy die deur vir haar oophou, dink Marta dadelik aan Mamma. Sy was die eerste persoon wat in haar geglo het. “*Jy het jou hart op ’n bergspits gesit, Marta, maar ek het jou nog nooit sien klim nie. Jy sal alles wat jy geleer het, goed aanwend. Ek weet dit. Ek glo in jou en ek glo dat die Here jou sal neem waar Hy wil.*” Sy het gelag en haar hande om Marta se gesig gevou. “*Dalk gaan jy nog ’n winkel of ’n hotel in Interlaken bestuur*.”

Monsieur Sherbrooke begin praat. Marta ignoreer hom terwyl sy deur die groot sitkamer, eetkamer en kombuis met sy ruim spens loop. Sy wys monsieur Sherbrooke op die rottemis.

“Sal ons boontoe gaan?” Hy loop terug na die ingangsportaal en trappe.

Marta ignoreer hom en stap in die rigting van die gang agter die trappe. “Daar behoort ’n kamer hier agter te wees.”

Sy hoor hom haastig by die trap afkom. “Net ’n stoorkamer, Mademoiselle.”

Marta maak die deur oop van die vertrek wat ’n gemeenskaplike muur met die sitkamer deel. Sy snak na haar asem oor die rooi, groen en geel *chinoiserie*-muurpapier teen die mure. Monsieur Sherbrooke

tree vinnig verby haar. “Die bediendekwartiere.”

Met ’n private bad? Sy kyk na die pienk, groen en swartgeteëlde mure en vloer, kloupootbad en spoeltoilet. “Wie hierdie huis ook al besit het, moes baie mooi na sy bediendes gekyk het.”

Hy staan in die middel van die kamer en wys na die brons muurlampe en ’n elegante gaslig wat uit die plafon hang.

Marta kyk na die vloer. “Wat is daardie vlek onder u voete?”

“Water.” Hy tree opsy. “Maar soos jy kan sien, is daar nie ernstige skade nie.”

Marta ril.

Monsieur Sherbrooke mik na die deur. “Daar is vier slaapkamers op die tweede vloer, en nog twee op die derde.”

Marta volg hom, loop ’n draai deur elke kamer en maak vensters oop en toe. Die twee slaapkamers op die derde vloer is baie klein, met skuins plafonne en soldervensters, en in die winter gaan hulle baie koud wees.

Monsieur Sherbrooke wys dat hulle ondertoe moet gaan. “Dit is ’n wonderlike huis, naby die spoorweg en teen ’n goeie prys.”

Marta kyk wantrouig na monsieur Sherbrooke. “Die huis het heelwat werk nodig.” Sy bereken die kostes vir die herstelwerk en wat dit gaan kos om die huis gereed te kry voordat sy haar aanbod maak, heelwat laer as die oorspronklike prys.

“Mademoiselle!” Hy sug ergerlik. “U kan nie van my verwag om so ’n aanbod ernstig op te neem nie!”

“Dis presies wat ek van u verwag, Monsieur. En u staan onder ’n morele verpligting om monsieur Charpentier van my aanbod in te lig.”

Sy oë flikker eers en vernou terwyl hy haar van kop tot tone beskou, asof om haar weer op te weeg. “Verstaan ek u reg, Mademoiselle, dat u die eienaar, monsieur Charpentier, ken?”

“Nee, Monsieur, maar ek weet wat in hierdie huis aangegaan het en waarom dit 18 maande lank leeg gestaan het. Soos u baie goed weet, was die vlek waarop u gestaan het, nie water nie, maar bloed. Sê vir monsieur Charpentier dat ek hom die volle bedrag kan betaal wat ek aanbied. Ek twyfel of hy ’n beter aanbod sal ontvang.” Sy gee hom ’n stukkie papier met die klerewinkel se adres. “Dit is waar u my kan bereik.” Sy besluit om haar huidige voordeel verder te benut. “As ek nie teen die einde van die week van u gehoor het nie, is daar ’n ander eiendom wat ek in gedagte het. Ongelukkig is dit nie een van u eiendomme nie. Goeiedag, Monsieur.” Hy bly alleen in die ingangsportaal staan.

Woensdag kom ’n boodskapper by die winkel aan. “Monsieur Charpentier sê dat hy u aanbod aanvaar.”

Die oomblik toe die dokumente geteken en die titel oorgedra is, bedank Marta haar werk by die klerewinkel en gaan bly in die huis in Unionstraat. Sy koop potte, panne, borde en messegoed en los alles in bokse totdat sy die stoof, toonbanke en werktafel geskuur het en die kaste en spens uitgeskrop het. Daarna skrop sy die vloere, vensterbanke en ruite. Sy ontdek ’n groothandelaar en koop gordynmateriaal. Sy hou die advertensies dop en meubileer die kamers met beddens, kaste en klerekaste wat sy teen weggeepryse koop, en die sitkamer met twee rusbanke, twee stelle gemakstoele en sytafeltjies. Sy koop ’n lang etenstafel en 12 stoele by ’n veiling wat sy met lampe en ’n paar matte afrond.

Dit neem haar ses weke en al haar geld om die huis gereed te maak. Sy betaal vir ’n klein advertensie in die koerant.

*Kamer te huur. Ruim. Stil omgewing naby die spoorwegstasie.*

Sy plaas ’n kennisgewing op die kerk se aansteekbord en hang ’n “Kamer beskikbaar”-bordjie in die venster. Sy raam en monteer die huisreëls teen die muur in die portaal:

*Huur betaalbaar op die eerste van die maand*
*Beddegoed weekliks gewas*
*Ontbyt om ses vm.*
*Aandete om ses nm.*
*Geen maaltye op Sondae*

Met haar laaste geld nooi sy haar bure na ’n formele teepartytjie. Terwyl sy Ceylontee, appel *Streusel*, sjokolade *éclairs* en hoendertoebroodjies bedien, kondig sy aan dat haar losieshuis gereed is vir huurders.

Die aand nadat die koerant verskyn het, maak Howard Basler, ’n spoorwegwerker, sy opwagting by die voordeur. “Ek het nie baie plek nodig nie.” Hy huur ’n solderkamer. ’n Spoorwegwerker se vrou, Carleen Kildare, se twee klein seuntjies is by haar toe sy kom vra of Marta ’n gesin kan inneem. Sy wys vir Carleen twee aangrensende kamers op die tweede vloer met ’n badkamer tussen hulle. Daardie aand bring Carleen haar man, Nally, en hulle sê dat hulle aan die einde van die maand sal kom intrek. Vier enkellopende mans, almal spoorwegwerkers, slaap twee-twee in die laaste twee beskikbare kamers op die derde vloer. Nadat Marta ’n mat oor die bloedvlek gegooi het, slaap sy heel gerieflik in die onderste kamer.

Net die klein slaapkamer op die derde vloer staan leeg.

Een van die bure vertel Carleen van Marta se deftige tee en die loseerders terg haar oor wanneer hulle soos Engelse lords en ladies bedien gaan word. Marta deel hulle mee dat sy Saterdag vir hulle 'n teepartytjie sal hou en dat hulle dan kan besluit of dit 'n gereelde instelling gaan word. Terwyl sy eier-en-komkommer-toebroodjies, Walliese tertjies, heuningspeserykoek en aarbeitertjies bedien, kondig sy aan met hoeveel sy hulle losies sal moet verhoog om hierdie ekstra diens te verskaf. Dit kos net 'n paar happies voordat almal instem.

Die inkomste oortref Marta se verwagtings.

Dit én die hoeveelheid werk.

* * *

> *Liewe Rosie*
>
> *Warner het die waarheid gepraat toe hy gesê het dat ek harder as ooit sou werk as ek my eie losieshuis besit. Dis nog donker wanneer ek opstaan en almal het al lankal gaan slaap voordat ek op my bed neerval.*
>
> *Carleen Kildare het aangebied om die wasgoed te doen as ek haar en haar man, Nally, se huur sou verminder. Ek het ingestem. Sy werk wanneer Gilley en Ryan smiddae slaap. Sy help my ook met die teepartytjie op Saterdae. Enid se Dundeekoek is altyd 'n groot sukses, sowel as Herr Becker se Schokoladenkuchen. Ek moet die tweede koek wegsteek as ek iets wil hê om by Sondag se teedrinkery by die kerk aan te bied.*
>
> *Ek het vandag 'n tweede huweliksaansoek van meneer Michaelson ontvang. Hy is een van die vyf mans wat in my huis bly. Hy is 42 en 'n vriendelike man, maar ek is heel tevrede op my eie. As hy so aanhou, sal ek sy huurgeld moet opskuif.*

Marta neem een dag 'n week vry en spandeer die helfte daarvan in die Duitse Lutherse Kerk. Sy hou daarvan om agter te sit en na die mense te kyk wanneer hulle inkom. 'n Lang, welgeklede man kom elke Sondag en sit twee banke voor haar. Hy het breë skouers en blonde hare. Hy bly nooit vir die teedrinkery ná kerk nie. Toe sy eendag ná die diens uitkom, sien sy hoe hy en Howard Basler hande skud. Sy sien die man weer 'n paar dae later toe hy in Unionstraat afloop.

Lady Daisy skryf vir haar.

> *Ek is so bly om te hoor dat jy jou droom van jou eie losieshuis verwesenlik het. Ek het vir Millicent gesê dat jy alreeds 'n*

*huweliksaansoek ontvang het, maar sy luister nie na rede nie.*

Een oggend nadat ’n storm amper ’n meter sneeu op Montreal uitgekeer en die herfsmodder verys het, is daar ’n klop aan Marta se voordeur. Aangesien die loseerders hulle eie sleutels het, ignoreer sy die onderbreking en bepaal haar by die berekening van haar uitgawes. Toe daar weer geklop word, harder hierdie keer, los sy haar werk, half met die gedagte om ’n halfverkluimde verkoopsman op haar voorstoep aan te tref. Die sneeu warrel na binne toe Marta die deur oopmaak.

’n Lang man in ’n swaar jas staan op die stoep. Sy serp bedek die onderste gedeelte van sy gesig en sy hoed is laag oor sy kop getrek. Hy het nie die tipiese verkooptassie by hom nie. “*Ich bin* Niclas Waltert.” Toe hy aan die rand van sy hoed raak, sif die sneeu grond toe. “*Mir würde gesagt, Sie haben ein Zimmer zu vermieten*.” Hy praat Hoogduits met ’n noordelike aksent en sy houding is dié van ’n opgevoede heer.

“Ja. Ek het ’n kamer te huur. Ek’s Marta Schneider. Asseblief.” Sy staan terug. “Kom in.” Sy maak ’n gebaar toe hy aarsel. “*Rasch!*” Sy betaal duur vir hout en steenkool, en sy wil nie al die warmte met die oop deur verloor nie.

Nadat hy sy hoed en jas uitgetrek het, stamp hy sy voete voordat hy inkom. As al haar loseerders maar soveel bedagsaamheid getoon het.

Marta se hart bokspring toe sy opkyk. Sy oë is so helder en blou soos die *Thunersee* in die lente. “Ek sien jou elke Sondag by die kerk.” Haar wange gloei die oomblik toe die woorde uit is.

Hy vra om verskoning in Duits en sê dat hy nie veel Engels praat nie.

Sy vertel hom verleë dat sy een klein solderkamer beskikbaar het en vra of hy daarna wil gaan kyk.

Ja, asseblief, sê hy.

Haar hart klop onstuimig. As hy die sit- en eetkamer eerste sien, en van die teepartytjie hoor wat elke Saterdag bedien word, sal hy dalk meer geneë vir ’n kamer wees. Hy sê niks nie. Sy neem hom boontoe en maak die deur van die leë kamer oop. Daar is ’n smal bed, bedkassie en keroseenlamp in die kamer. Daar is nie plek vir ’n stoel nie, maar daar is ’n bankie onder die soldervenster wat op Unionstraat uitkyk. Toe Niclas Waltert ingaan, stamp hy sy kop teen die skuins plafon. Hy gee ’n sagte laggie en trek die gordyne oop om deur die venster te kyk.

“Waar werk u, Herr Waltert?” Toe hy omkyk na haar, is daar ’n fladdering in haar maag.

“Ek’s ’n ingenieur by die Baldwin-spoorwegmaatskappy. Hoeveel wil

u vir die kamer hê?"

Sy noem die prys. "Ek's jammer ek kan u nie beter akkommodasie bied nie. Ek dink die kamer is te klein vir u."

Hy kyk weer rond en loop terug na die deur. Nadat hy sy paspoort uit sy sak gehaal het, bring hy 'n paar note te voorskyn en hou dit na haar toe uit. Sy vingers is lank en skraal soos dié van 'n kunstenaar. "As dit geleë is, sal ek vroeg vanaand terugkom."

Haar vingers bewe toe sy die note in haar voorskootsak steek. "Aandete is om sesuur, Herr Waltert." Sy loop voor hom uit toe hulle met die trappies afklim en staan in die voorportaal terwyl hy sy serp van die haak teen die muur afhaal en dit om sy nek knoop. Dan trek hy sy jas aan en knoop dit toe. Alles wat hy doen, is metodies en vol manlike grasie. Sy maak die deur oop toe hy sy hoed van die haak afhaal. Hy tree oor die drumpel en tik sy hoed liggies teen sy been toe hy omdraai. "Sal ek vanaand u man ontmoet?"

'n Aardige sensasie versprei deur haar ledemate. "Dis *Fräulein,* Herr Waltert. Ek het nie 'n man nie."

Hy maak 'n beleefde buiging. "Fräulein." Hy sit sy hoed op en gaan met die stoeptrappies af. Toe sy die deur toemaak, besef Marta dat sy bewe.

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Niclas is net betyds vir aandete en sit aan die onderpunt van die tafel. Hy luister, maar hy neem nie deel aan die gesprek nie. Nally en Carleen Kildare het hulle hande vanaand vol met Gilley en Ryan en Marta wonder bekommerd of Herr Waltert hulle irriterend gaan vind. Maar toe hy met hulle praat, noem hy hulle op die naam en doen 'n kunsie met twee lepels wat albei kinders in verwondering het. "Doen dit weer!" roep hulle uit. Toe sy oë hare ontmoet, slaan haar hart bollemakiesie.

Ná ete staan die mans op om in die sitkamer te gaan kaart speel. Die Kildares gaan boontoe om hulle seuns in die bed te kry. Marta tel die leë vleisskottel op, oorbewus van Niclas Waltert wat nog aan tafel talm. "Het jy nie 'n bediende wat jou help nie, Fräulein?"

Sy gee 'n kort laggie. "Ek is die enigste bediende in hierdie huis, Herr Waltert." Sy tel 'n leë groentebak op die skinkbord en reik na 'n volgende. "Carleen help met die wasgoed. Verder kry ek darem als gedoen."

“U is ’n uitstekende kok.”

“*Danke*.” Toe sy van die kombuis af kom, is Niclas besig om die res van die skottelgoed op die hoek van die tafel naaste aan die kombuis te pak. “U hoef dit nie te doen nie!”

Hy staan terug. “Ek het net gedink ek moet iets doen voordat ek ’n guns vra, Fräulein Schneider.”

“Watse guns?” Sy tel die skottelgoed op.

“Ek moet leer Engels praat. Ek verstaan genoeg om my werk te doen, maar nie genoeg om ’n gesprek met die ander loseerders te voer nie. Sal u bereid wees om my te leer? Ek sal u natuurlik vir u tyd betaal.”

Die idee om tyd saam met hom deur te bring geval haar só dat sy nie hoop dit wys nie. “Natuurlik, en u hoef my nie te betaal nie. Mense het my geleer en niks daarvoor gevra nie. Wanneer sal u wil begin?”

“Vanaand?”

“Ek sal sitkamer toe kom nadat ek die skottelgoed gewas het.”

“Ek sal daar wag.”

Sy staan in die deur en haar oë volg hom toe hy die vertrek verlaat.

Dit neem haar ’n uur om die potte, panne en borde te was en alles te bêre. Sy wonder of Niclas Waltert moeg geraak het en boontoe is. Op pad na die sitkamer kan sy die mans hoor kaartspeel. Toe sy in die deur verskyn, staan Niclas op en sit sy boek neer. Met die nader loop, sien sy dat dit ’n Bybel is, met *Niclas Bernhard Waltert* in goud op die swart leeromslag gegraveer. “Is u ’n godsdienstige man, Herr Waltert?”

Hy glimlag effens. “My pa het my vir die bediening bestem, maar ek het vroeg geleer dat ek nie vir die lewe van predikant geskik is nie. Asseblief.” Hy hou sy hand uitnodigend uit sodat sy moet sit. Marta besef dat hy nie sal sit voordat sy gaan sit het nie. Geen man het haar al ooit met soveel respek behandel nie.

“Hoe is u nie geskik nie?”

“’n Predikant se lewe behoort aan sy kudde.”

“Ons lewe behoort aan die Here, of ons nou binne of buite die kerk is, Herr Waltert. Of dis wat my ma my geleer het.”

“Van sommige mense word daar groter opoffering gevra, en sekere goed wat ek nie bereid is om op te gee nie.”

“Soos?”

“’n Vrou, Fräulein, en kinders.”

Haar hartklop versnel. “Dit is ’n Katolieke priester wat nie mag trou

nie, nie ’n Lutherse predikant nie.”

“Ja, maar die gesin word baie ontneem ter wille van die gemeente.”

Hy word stil. Toe haar oë syne ontmoet, skrik sy vir die gevoelens wat aan haar hart pluk. *Is dit hoe Rosie voel wanneer sy na Arik kyk? Of wat lady Daisy vir haar Clive gevoel het?* Marta kyk weg, lig haar ken en kyk terug na hom. “Sal ons met ons les begin?”

“Net wanneer u gereed is, Fräulein.”

Daarna wag Niclas elke aand vir Marta in die sitkamer. Terwyl die ander Kanadese mans kaartspeel, leer sy Niclas Engels praat.

“Meneer Waltert lyk heel ingenome met jou,” sê Carleen eendag terwyl sy die lakens aftrek om gewas te word.

“Hy het my gevra om hom Engels te leer.”

Sy lag terwyl sy die bondel lakens optel. “Nou ja, dit was ’n handige verskoning.”

“Sodra Herr Waltert genoeg weet om ’n gesprek te voer, sal hy saam met die ander mans kaartspeel.”

“Nie as die manier waarop hy na jou kyk, enige aanduiding is nie.”

“Hy kyk nie op daardie manier na my nie, Carleen.”

“Wil jy vir my sê dat jy nie van hom hou nie?”

Marta bloos toe sy die res van die beddegoed optel en in ’n mandjie stop. “Ek hou net soveel van hom soos van my ander loseerders.”

Carleen lag. “Jy het nog nooit gebloos as Davy Michaelson na jou kyk nie.”

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“Ek het nie jou gawe met tale nie, Fräulein. Ek weet nie of ek ooit gaan leer nie.”

“Geen Duits nie, onthou,” korrigeer Marta. “Net Engels.”

“Engels is ’n moeilike taal.”

“Enigiets wat die moeite werd is om te leer, is moeilik.”

“Waarom kan ons nie net vir ’n rukkie in Duits praat nie?”

“Want op daardie manier gaan u nie Engels leer nie.”

“Ek … meer leer … van jou,” sê Niclas in gebroke Engels.

Duidelik gefrustreerd vervolg hy in Duits: “Ek wil uitvind of ons by mekaar pas.”

Hy kon niks meer skokkends gesê het nie. Sy maak haar mond oop en dan weer toe.

“Ek kan sien dat ek jou verras het. Kom ons los die Engels vir eers

sodat ek my duidelik kan uitdruk. Ek wil jou die hof maak."

Marta tel haar hande op en hou dit teen haar vlammende wange. Davy Michaelson kyk na hulle terwyl die ander in gedempte stemme praat. Marta kry gou beheer oor haarself en laat sak haar hande op haar skoot. "Hoekom sou 'n man soos u iemand soos ek die hof wil maak?"

Niclas lyk verbaas. "Hoekom? Want jy is 'n buitengewone jong vrou. Want ek bewonder jou. Want ... " Sy blik liefkoos haar gesig en beweeg dan oor die res van haar op 'n manier wat haar hele liggaam laat warm word. "Ek hou van alles wat ek van jou weet."

Is dit wat liefde aan iemand doen? Haar binnestebuite en onderstebo keer? "Ek is jou gasvrou."

Sy mondhoeke lig. "Moet ek elders gaan bly as ek jou die hof wil maak?"

"Nee." Sy antwoord so vinnig dat haar wange opnuut warm word. "Ek bedoel ... " Sy kan aan niks sinvols dink om te sê nie.

"Sal jy Sondag saam met my kerk toe gaan, Marta?"

Hy het nog nooit tevore haar voornaam gebruik nie. Haar asem ontsnap verbouereerd oor haar lippe. "Ons is elke Sondag saam in die kerk."

Sy uitdrukking versag. "Ek gaan. Jy gaan. Ons gaan nie saam nie. Ek wil hê jy moet saam met my stap. Ek wil hê jy moet langs my sit."

Skielik voel sy geweldig kwesbaar en soek na 'n uitkomkans. Sy weet dat as sy nee sê, hy nooit weer sal vra nie. Sy sal dieselfde paadjie as Millicent loop en haarself vir die res van haar lewe verwyt. Het sy dan nie juis Kanada toe gekom met die skrale hoop om 'n geskikte man te vind nie? Niclas Waltert is baie meer as geskik.

Hy kyk soekend in haar oë. "Wat pla jou?"

Dat hy gaan uitvind dat sy hom nie waardig is nie, dat hy na 'n rukkie sal ontdek dat sy glad nie geskik is nie. Sy het nie eens hoërskool toe gegaan nie – en hy is 'n ingenieur. Hy is aantreklik. Sy is vaal. Hy is gekultiveerd. Sy is 'n kleremaker se dogter.

Sy tas vervaard in haar gedagtes rond voordat sy na die eerste beskikbare verskoning gryp. "Ek weet nie eens hoe oud jy is nie."

"Ek is 37. Ek hoop nie dis te oud vir jou nie."

Sy staar na die pols wat vinnig in sy keel klop. "Nee. Nee, jy is nie te oud nie." Toe sy haar oë oplig, sien sy die lig wat in syne verskyn toe hy glimlag.

"Dan sal jy hierdie Sondag saam met my gaan?"

"Ja." Sy knik formeel en loer na die horlosie op die kaggelrak. "Dit

raak laat. Ek dink ons kan volstaan by ons Engelse lesse."

Niclas staan op en hou sy hand uit. Toe sy opstaan, haar hand in syne, weet sy dat sy hom na enige plek toe sal volg, selfs na ’n Bedoeïenetent in die middel van die Sahara.

## Chapter 12

**1913**

*Dear Rosie,*

*I am married!*

*I never thought anyone would want me, and certainly never a man like Niclas Bernhard Waltert. He came to Canada a year before I did and is an engineer for the Baldwin Locomotive Works. He is tall and very handsome.*

*We were married on Easter Sunday in the German Lutheran Church. I made a blue skirt to wear with my Sunday-best white shirtwaist. I saw no reason to waste money on a wedding gown I would never wear again. My boarders came, even Davy Michaelson, and some of the neighbors on Union Street and members of the congregation.*

*I thought I was happy when I bought my boardinghouse, but I have never been as truly happy as this. It makes me afraid sometimes. We only courted for three months. I know little about Niclas's life in Germany or what brought him to Canada. But I dare not ask because there are things I have not told him. I haven't told him I turned a whorehouse into a boardinghouse. I haven't told him a woman was murdered in the bedroom we now share. Nor will he ever know I had a sister who committed suicide.*

* * *

**1914**

Niclas never said much about his work, but Marta heard the other four men talk about layoffs and difficult times at the locomotive works. Niclas got up early every morning and went into the parlor to read his Bible. He said grace before everyone ate breakfast. He set his dish on the end of the table when he finished and left for work. When it neared time for him to come home, she would stand in the parlor and watch for him. He looked weary and unhappy when he walked up the street, but always had a bright smile when he found her waiting. After dinner, he would go into the parlor with the other men. While they played cards, he read his Bible. She would pause in the doorway before she went to bed. He always gave her a few minutes to change into her nightgown and slip between the covers before he joined her.

One night, he didn't come until almost midnight. She lay awake in a fever of worry. She heard the whisper of his belt. He folded his

clothes onto the chair before he came to bed. He slid his arm around her and pulled her back into the curve of his body. “I know you’re not asleep.”

“I see how unhappy you are.” She didn’t want to cry. “Are you sorry you married me, Niclas?”

“No.” He rolled her onto her back. “No! You’re the best thing in my life.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“They’re closing the locomotive works.”

She felt a wave of relief. Combing her fingers through his hair, she drew his head down. “You’ll find another job.”

“Rumors of war keep coming, Marta. Kaiser Wilhelm keeps ratcheting up the German Imperial Navy to take naval supremacy from Britain. I’m German. That’s enough to rouse hostility right now.”

“Do you think there will be a war?”

“It won’t take much to start one, not with an arms race spreading over the continent. And now the political maneuverings of the Russians are turning the Kingdom of Serbia into a powder keg in Europe.”

As the days passed, she saw the toll the talk of war took on Niclas as he went out every day looking for work and came home with nothing but bad news.

She was afraid to tell him hers.

“You can help me with the boardinghouse.”

His eyes flashed in anger. “A man is supposed to support his wife! And what is there for me to do here? You have everything working like a finely tuned Swiss watch!”

Hurt, she pushed her chair back and stood. “Well, I won’t be able to do as much when the baby comes!” Niclas looked so shocked and dismayed, she burst into tears and fled into the kitchen. She pounded her fists on the worktable and turned quickly toward the sink when Niclas came through the swinging door. “Go away.” He caught hold of her and turned her around. He dug his fingers into her hair. “Let go!” He kissed her. She struggled, but he didn’t let go.

“*Es tut mir leid,* Marta. I’m sorry.” Niclas wiped her cheeks and kissed her again, gently this time. “Don’t cry.” He held her close. She felt his heart beating heavily against hers. “I’m happy about the baby. Everything will be fine.”

Marta thought that meant he would help her with the boardinghouse, but Niclas went out the next morning. When he didn’t

come back for lunch, she worried. He came in just before dinner, hung up his coat and hat, and came into the dining room. He looked like he had exciting news, but it had to wait as the others came in for the evening meal. He said grace, and plates began to pass from hand to hand. He looked down the table at her, eyes glowing.

Rather than go into the parlor after dinner, he helped clear the table and followed her into the kitchen. “They’re hiring harvest hands in Manitoba.”

“Harvest hands? Manitoba? What has that to do with you? You’re an engineer.”

“An unemployed engineer. There’s no work for me here. If a job opened, I wouldn’t get it. They’d be afraid I was a German spy. I must find another way to make a living.”

She shut off the water and turned, but he raised his hand. “Don’t say anything. Just listen to me. As long as we remain in this house, you won’t see me as the head of this family.”

Realization struck her. “You’ve already agreed to go, haven’t you?” He didn’t have to answer. Her body went cold. She thought she would faint and sat heavily on the stool. “What do you know about harvesting?”

“I’ll learn.”

“And you expect me to go with you?”

“Yes. You’re my wife.”

“And what about the boardinghouse?”

“Sell it.”

Marta felt everything she had worked for slipping through her fingers. “I can’t.”

“What matters to you most, Marta? Me? Or this boardinghouse?”

“That’s not fair!” She closed her eyes. “You don’t know how I’ve sacrificed.”

“Do you love me at all?”

She jumped off the stool, glaring at him. “I could ask you the same question! You didn’t even mention this to me before you went out and started making plans!” She stood, fiercely angry. “Why did you study engineering?”

“Because my father demanded it. Because I was a dutiful son. The truth is I never liked engineering. It was something I did because it was what I studied, but I never had any pleasure from it.”

“And you think being a farmhand in Manitoba will make you happy?” Her voice sounded strident in her own ears.

“I had a garden in Germany. I liked watching things grow.”

Niclas spoke so calmly and sincerely, Marta could only look back at him. Did she even know this man? She had fallen in love with a complete stranger.

“You must decide.” He left her alone in the kitchen.

She sat alone in the parlor after everyone else had gone upstairs. She hoped Niclas would come out and talk to her, but he didn’t. When she finally went to bed, he turned her to him. He kept her awake far into the night. When she lay languid, he stroked her hair back from her temples. “I leave day after tomorrow.”

Gasping, she jerked out of his arms. Turning away from him, she wept. Niclas didn’t try to draw her close again. The bed shifted as he rolled onto his back. He sighed. “You can stay here and hold on to everything you’ve built for yourself, Marta, or you can risk everything and come with me to Manitoba. I leave it to you.”

Marta didn’t speak to him the next day.

Niclas didn’t touch her that night.

When he rose early the next morning and packed his bags, she stayed in bed, her face turned away from him. “Good-bye, Marta.” Niclas closed the door quietly behind him. Marta sat up then. By the time she threw on her robe and went out into the hallway, he was gone. She went back to her bedroom. Falling to her knees, she sobbed.

Someone tapped on her door a while later. “Is there a problem, Marta? There’s no breakfast.”

“Fix it yourself!” Marta pulled the blanket over her head and stayed in bed most of the day crying. When she served dinner that evening, Nally looked perplexed.

“Where’s Niclas?”

“Gone.” She went back into the kitchen and didn’t come out again.

* * *

*Dearest Rosie,*

*Niclas has left me and gone off to work on a wheat farm in Manitoba. He went away three weeks ago and I have not heard from him since. I begin to understand how Elise felt when she walked out into the snow. . . .*

* * *

Marta worked feverishly each day, spending most of her time in the kitchen. She no longer sat at the dining room table with the tenants, using the excuse of morning sickness. In truth, she was afraid

she would burst into tears if anyone asked whether she had heard anything from Niclas yet. He had told everyone of his plans the evening before he left, so they knew he had gone off to Manitoba without her. They didn't need to know she didn't think he would come back.

Rev. Rudiger came to visit her. She served him tea and cake in the parlor, then sat tensely waiting for the purpose of his visit, afraid of what he would have to say to her.

"Niclas wrote to me, Marta."

Hurt welled up inside her. "Did he?" She pressed her back against the wingback chair, feeling trapped. "He doesn't write to me. Did you come here today to tell me I have to go to Manitoba? Are you going to tell me I'm a disobedient wife and I should submit to Niclas and comply with his wishes?"

His face filled with sorrow. He set his teacup and saucer aside. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands in front of him and looked into her face. "I came because I know how difficult this separation must be on both of you. I came to tell you God loves you, and He did not give you a heart of fear."

"God loves me." She heard the sarcasm in her tone and looked away, unable to hold her pastor's gentle gaze.

"Yes, Marta. God loves you. He has a plan for you."

"My mother used to tell me the same thing. I know He has a plan for me." She glared at him. "And a plan for Niclas."

"A plan for both of you together. God would not tear apart what He has put together."

Marta couldn't speak past the lump growing in her throat. Rev. Rudiger didn't ask questions or tell her what to do. When he stood, she walked him to the door. He put on his coat and hat. Marta stepped out onto the porch. "Please forgive me, Rev. Rudiger." As the words poured from her lips, she remembered Elise lying in the snow.

Rev. Rudiger turned. Marta saw no condemnation in his gentle expression. "My wife and I are praying for you. We love you very much. If you need anything, you've only to ask."

She blinked back tears. "Pray Niclas changes his mind and comes home."

"We will all pray God has His way with each of us."

Marta dreamed of Mama that night. *"Fly, Marta."* She sat on the log in the middle of the Alpine meadow, a little cross marking the place where Elise lay. *"Fly!"*

Marta rocked back and forth, weeping. "I did fly, Mama. I did!" The wind blew, whipping through the trees. "I built my nest."

Mama disappeared and Marta found herself standing in a desert. Her feet sank into the sand. Frightened and alone, she struggled, but couldn't pull herself out. Sobbing, she thrashed, but that only made her sink faster.

"Marta."

Heart leaping at the sound of Niclas's tender voice, she looked up. He wore a seamless robe like Jesus. When he held his hands out to her, she grasped hold. The sand swirled away with the wind, and she found herself standing on solid ground. He enfolded her in his arms and kissed her. When he let go of her, she cried. He held out his hand again. "Come, Marta." A bedouin tent stood before her.

A letter arrived the next afternoon.

*Dear Marta,*

*Robert Madson has given me forty acres to cultivate. He has also promised me seed, six workhorses, a cow, and a few chickens. A house and wagon come with the job. I will share profits with him at the end of each harvest.*

*If you come, I must know a few days before you are to arrive. You can reach me at this address . . .*

*Please come. I miss holding you in my arms.*

Crying, she read the letter over and over, torn by longing, but paralyzed by fear and responsibility. It was easy for him to say *come*. He owned nothing. She couldn't just walk away and leave everything.

Could she live in the plains of Manitoba with winters forty below zero and summers of melting heat? Could she live out in the middle of nowhere, the closest neighbor a mile away and half a day's ride for supplies in some small farm town?

And how could a man who had gone to the university in Berlin be satisfied plowing fields? How could he give up building locomotives or bridges to become a sharecropper? Surely he would change his mind. And then what would happen?

She knew what Mama would tell her. *"Go, Marta!"* But Mama's life had been one of drudgery and pain, sorrow and affliction. She thought of Daisy Stockhard, sitting in her wheelchair in the middle of Kew Gardens saying she would have lived anywhere with her husband.

It all came down to one question: could she be happy without Niclas?

* * *

When Marta read the newspaper, she felt her blood go cold. Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria had been assassinated by a Serbian national. Niclas had been correct. That gave the Austrians the excuse they'd been looking for to declare war on Serbia. Soon every country on the Continent would be pulled into the mess.

Russia, as Austria's ally, mobilized its army to assist Austria and called for France, its ally, to enter the war. As a consequence, Germany declared war on Russia and France. As German troops poured into Belgium, Sir Edward Grey, Britain's foreign secretary, sent an ultimatum ordering Germany to withdraw her troops. Germany refused and Britain declared war on them, drawing Canada into the fray as well.

By the end of August, thousands of Russians had died in the Battle of Tannenberg and 125,000 had been taken prisoner. Great Britain's ally, Japan, declared war on Germany. The Germans went after the Russians at Masurian Lakes, taking another 45,000 prisoners. The Ottoman Empire entered the war to help Germany, as they continued their advance through Belgium.

Marta grieved. "The world has gone mad."

A letter arrived from Rosie.

*The whole of Europe is involved in this gathering storm. It is like an argument that starts between two boys, and then others join in to help one side or the other, and soon it becomes a mob. Oh, Marta, I fear thousands will die if this goes the course my father and brothers say it will. I thank God I am enclosed in the mountains of Switzerland and our men will not be involved in the fighting. . . .*

*You know how much I love you. You are my dearest friend. And so I feel I have the right to ask you: Why are you waiting? What does a house matter if the man you love no longer lives there? You have written enough about dear Niclas for me to know he is not like your father. Go to him. You will never be happy otherwise.*

Marta crumpled the letter in her hand and wept. It would have been better if she had never fallen in love. She ached to be with Niclas. Her life had become misery without him. But she couldn't just go. She had to think of the baby, too. Niclas's baby.

She ran her hand over her swelling belly. She remembered Solange's screams as her flesh tore. She remembered the blood. Would there be a midwife in the middle of the plains, miles from town? What if something went wrong?

Carleen came in with the mail. She shook her head, and Marta knew there was no letter from Niclas. Everyone in the house seemed to be waiting for word from him.

*Dear Niclas,*

*Please forgive me for not seeing you off at the train station or wishing you well. You must despise me for being such a stubborn wife.*

*I'm afraid to come to Manitoba now. I helped deliver a baby in Montreux. I know what it entails. It is another three months before our baby will arrive, and then I will need time to heal.*

*I don't want to sell the boardinghouse yet. It took years to save up for it, and I will lose what I have invested in repairs and paint and furnishings. It is not simply about the money. After one season on the plains, you may change your mind about farming. What if locusts come and there is nothing left, or blight? We have a house here in Montreal. We have a way to make a living.*

*Promises flow easily from the lips of the rich, Niclas. Other than Boaz, I have never heard of a man so generous to his workers as Herr Madson. If you didn't get it in writing, you may find his hands full after the harvest, and your own, callused and empty.*

She received his reply two weeks later.

*My dearest wife,*

*I thank God. I have prayed constantly that your heart would soften toward me.*

*A man is only as good as his word. My yes is yes. God tells us not to worry. Look to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, and see how He feeds and clothes them. God will take care of us, too. Wait until you see the beauty of this land, the waves of wheat that ripple like waves on a sea. You are never alone. God is with you, Marta, and I would be with you, too.*

*But I understand your fear. You are God's gift to me, my ever-practical wife. As much as I miss you, I think you are right in remaining in Montreal until after our baby comes. As soon as you are well enough and you both can travel, come to me. Let me know well in advance when you will arrive so I will be in Winnipeg to meet you.*

Marta read between the lines and knew Niclas had signed a contract guaranteeing he would work the land, but had received no written promises from the landowner. She flattened the letter on her table and rubbed her aching temples. The baby kicked strongly and she leaned back, resting her hands over her abdomen.

Sighing, she closed her eyes, weary of the battle. *God, I give up.*

*What do I do?* In that moment of stillness and quiet, she knew. Feeling a lightness inside her, she pushed her chair back, folded the letter, and stuffed it into her apron pocket. She found Carleen in the laundry room. “I’m going to Manitoba as soon as the baby is born and I can travel.”

Her face fell. “So you’ll be selling the house.”

“No. I’m going to train you to run it.”

“Me? Oh no! I couldn’t be doing that!”

“Nonsense.” She grabbed hold of a sheet Carleen was cranking through the wringer, shaking it out as it came through. “You’re five years older than I, and you finished high school. If I can do it, of course you can.” She laughed. “The most important thing is to keep the lions well fed.”

# Hoofstuk 12

## 1913

*Liefste Rosie*

*Ek is getroud!*

*Ek het nooit gedink iemand sal my wil hê nie, en beslis nie 'n man soos Niclas Bernhard Waltert nie. Hy het 'n jaar voor my Kanada toe gekom en is 'n ingenieur vir die Baldwin Spoorwegmaatskappy. Hy is lank en baie aantreklik.*

*Ons het die Paassondag in die Duitse Lutherse kerk getrou. Ek het 'n blou romp gemaak om saam met my wit Sondagbloesie te dra. Ek het nie die nut daarvan gesien om baie geld aan 'n trourok te spandeer wat ek nooit weer gaan dra nie. My loseerders het almal gekom, selfs Davy Michaelson. 'n Paar van die mense in Unionstraat en van die gemeentelede was ook daar.*

*Ek het gedink dat ek gelukkig was toe ek my losieshuis gekoop het, maar ek was nog nooit so waarlik gelukkig soos nou nie. Soms maak dit my bang. Ons het net drie maande lank uitgegaan. Ek weet nie baie van Niclas se lewe in Duitsland of waarom hy Kanada toe gekom het nie. Maar ek durf hom nie vra nie, want daar is sekere dinge wat ek hom nie vertel het nie. Ek het nie vir hom gesê dat ek 'n bordeel in 'n losieshuis verander het nie. Ek het nie vir hom gesê dat 'n vrou in die kamer vermoor is waar ons nou slaap nie. Hy sal ook nooit weet dat ek 'n sussie gehad het wat selfmoord gepleeg het nie.*

## 1914

Niclas praat nooit veel oor sy werk nie, maar Marta hoor hoe die ander mans van afdankings en moeilike tye by die spoorwegmaatskappy praat. Niclas staan elke oggend baie vroeg op en gaan sitkamer toe om Bybel te lees. Hy bid soggens aan die ontbyttafel. Wanneer hy klaar geëet het, sit hy sy bord op die hoek van die tafel neer en gaan werk toe. Wanneer sy hom laatmiddag

terugverwag, gaan staan sy in die voorportaal en wag vir hom. Hy lyk moeg en ongelukkig wanneer hy in die straat aankom, maar glimlag altyd wanneer hy haar sien. Ná ete gaan hy saam met die ander mans sitkamer toe. Terwyl hulle kaart speel, lees hy uit sy Bybel. Voordat sy kamer toe gaan, staan sy 'n oomblik in die sitkamerdeur. Hy gee haar altyd 'n paar minute om haar nagrok aan te trek en tussen die lakens in te glip voordat hy by haar aansluit.

Een nag is dit amper middernag voordat hy kamer toe kom. Sy lê en wag, koorsig van bekommernis. Sy hoor die geluid van sy gordel, hoe hy uittrek en sy klere op die stoel opvou voordat hy bed toe kom. Hy sit sy arm om haar en trek haar tot teen die inham van sy lyf. “Ek weet jy is nog wakker.”

“Ek kan sien dat jy ongelukkig is.” Sy wil nie huil nie. “Is jy spyt dat jy met my getrou het, Niclas?”

“Nee.” Hy draai haar op haar rug. “Nee! Dit was die beste besluit van my lewe.”

“Wat is dan fout?”

“Hulle gaan die spoorwegmaatskappy toemaak.”

Die verligting spoel deur haar. Sy kam met haar vingers deur sy hare en trek sy kop nader. “Jy sal 'n ander werk kry.”

“Daar is gerugte van oorlog, Marta. Keiser Wilhelm karring aanhoudend aan die Duitse koninklike vloot om Brittanje as seeheerser te onttroon. Ek is Duits. Dis op die oomblik genoeg om vyandigheid uit te lok.”

“Dink jy daar gaan oorlog wees?”

“Dit sal nie veel neem om een te begin nie, nie met die wapenwedloop wat oor die vasteland versprei nie. En nou is die politieke maneuvers van die Russe besig om die Serwiese koninkryk in 'n kruitvat in Europa te verander.”

Gedurende die volgende paar dae sien sy hoe die oorlogspraatjies Niclas raak wanneer hy soggens uitgaan om werk te soek en saans sonder goeie nuus terugkeer.

Sy is bang om hom van hare te vertel.

“Jy kan my met die losieshuis help.”

Sy oë flits woedend. “'n Man is veronderstel om vir sy vrou te sorg! En wat is hier vir my om te doen? Alles loop soos klokslag!”

Sy skuif haar stoel terug en staan seergemaak op. “Wel, ek sal nie so baie kan doen wanneer die baba hier is nie!” Niclas lyk so geskok en ontsteld dat sy in trane uitbars en kombuis toe vlug. Sy slaan met haar vuiste op die werktafel en draai vinnig na die wasbak toe Niclas by die

swaaideur inkom. “Gaan weg.” Hy neem haar aan die skouers en draai haar om. Hy stoot sy vingers deur haar hare. “Los my!” Hy soen haar. Sy worstel, maar hy laat haar nie gaan nie.

“*Est tut mir Leid*, Marta. Ek’s jammer.” Niclas vee haar wange af en soen haar weer, sagter hierdie keer. “Moenie huil nie.” Hy hou haar vas. Sy kan sy hart swaar teen hare voel klop. “Ek’s bly oor die baba. Alles gaan uitwerk.”

Marta het gedink dit beteken dat hy haar met die losieshuis gaan help, maar Niclas is die volgende oggend vroeg uit. Toe hy nie vir middagete huis toe kom nie, is sy bekommerd. Hy kom net voor ses en nadat hy sy jas en hoed opgehang het, kom hy eetkamer toe. Dit lyk asof hy opwindende nuus het, maar dit moet wag terwyl die ander vir aandete kom aansit. Hy bid en borde word oor en weer aangegee. Sy oë skitter toe hy oor die tafel na haar kyk.

Pleks daarvan om ná ete sitkamer toe te gaan, help hy Marta afdek en volg haar na die kombuis. “Hulle soek mans om te help oes in Manitoba.”

“Oeswerkers? Manitoba? Wat het dit met jou te doen? Jy is ’n ingenieur.”

“’n Werklose ingenieur. Hier is nie werk vir my nie. As daar ’n pos oopgaan, sal ek dit nie kry nie. Hulle sal bang wees ek is ’n Duitse spioen. Ek moet ’n ander manier kry om ons te onderhou.”

Sy maak die kraan toe en draai om, maar hy lig sy hand. “Moet niks sê nie. Luister net na my. Solank ons in hierdie huis bly, sal jy my nie as die hoof van die gesin sien nie.”

Dan tref dit haar. “Jy het alreeds besluit om te gaan!” Hy hoef nie te antwoord nie. Sy word yskoud. Dit voel asof sy gaan flou word en sy gaan sit swaar op die stoel. “Wat weet jy van plaaswerk af?”

“Ek sal leer.”

“En jy verwag van my om saam met jou te gaan?”

“Ja. Jy is my vrou.”

“En wat van die losieshuis?”

“Verkoop dit.”

Marta voel hoe alles waarvoor sy gewerk het, deur haar vingers glip. “Ek kan nie.”

“Wat is vir jou die belangrikste, Marta? Ek? Of hierdie losieshuis?”

“Dis nie regverdig nie!” Sy sluit haar oë. “Jy weet nie wat ek alles opgeoffer het nie.”

“Is jy enigsins lief vir my?”

Sy spring op en gluur hom aan. “Ek kan dieselfde vir jou vra! Jy het

dit nie eens vir my genoem voordat jy begin planne maak het nie!" Sy is nou behoorlik kwaad. "Hoekom het jy 'n ingenieur geword?"

"Want my pa het dit van my verwag. Want ek was 'n pligsgetroue seun. Maar die feit is, ek het nog nooit van ingenieurswese gehou nie. Dit was iets wat ek gedoen het omdat ek dit studeer het, maar ek het dit nog nooit geniet nie."

"En jy dink dit sal jou gelukkig maak om op 'n plaas in Manitoba te werk?" Haar stem is skril in haar eie ore.

"In Duitsland het ek 'n tuin gehad. Ek hou daarvan om dinge te sien groei."

Niclas se stem is so sag en so opreg dat Marta net na hom kan kyk. Ken sy hierdie man? Sy het op 'n volslae vreemdeling verlief geraak.

"Jy moet besluit." Hy laat haar alleen in die kombuis.

Nadat almal boontoe is, gaan sit sy alleen in die sitkamer. Sy hoop vergeefs dat Niclas sal uitkom en met haar gesels. Toe sy uiteindelik bed toe gaan, draai hy haar na hom. Hy hou haar wakker tot diep in die nag. Toe sy ontspanne langs hom lê, streel hy haar hare uit haar gesig. "Ek vertrek oormôre."

Sy trek haar asem skerp in en ruk haar los. Dan draai sy met haar rug na hom en huil. Niclas probeer nie weer om haar nader te trek nie. Sy kan aan die bed voel dat hy op sy rug draai. Hy sug. "Jy kan hier bly en aan alles vashou wat jy vir jouself gebou het, Marta, of alles waag en saam met my Manitoba toe kom. Ek laat dit aan jou oor."

Marta praat die volgende dag nie met hom nie.

Niclas raak die aand nie aan haar nie.

Toe hy die volgende oggend vroeg opstaan en sy sakke pak, bly sy in die bed, haar gesig weggekeer van hom. "Totsiens, Marta." Niclas maak die deur sag agter hom toe. Marta sit regop. Teen die tyd dat sy haar kamerjas aangetrek het en in die gang uitkom, is hy weg. Terug in haar kamer val sy op haar knieë neer en snik.

'n Rukkie later is daar 'n klop aan haar deur. "Is daar fout, Marta? Daar is nie ontbyt nie."

"Julle kan self vir julle maak!" Marta trek die kombers oor haar kop en bly vir die grootste deel van die dag in die bed en huil. Toe sy daardie aand ete bedien, kyk Nally vraend na haar.

"Waar is Niclas?"

"Weg." Sy gaan terug kombuis toe en kom nie weer uit nie.

*Liefste Rosie*
*Niclas het my verlaat en op 'n koringplaas in Manitoba gaan werk. Hy het drie weke gelede weggegaan en ek het nog niks van hom gehoor nie. Ek begin verstaan hoe Elise gevoel het toe sy in die sneeu uitgeloop het ...*

***

Marta werk elke dag koorsagtig en bring die meeste van die tyd in die kombuis deur. Sy gebruik haar oggendnaarheid as verskoning sodat sy nie saam met die loseerders aan tafel hoef te sit nie. In werklikheid is sy bang dat sy in trane gaan uitbars as enigiemand haar vra of sy al iets van Niclas gehoor het. Hy het almal die aand voor sy vertrek van sy planne vertel; dus weet hulle dat hy sonder haar Manitoba toe is. Hulle hoef nie te weet dat sy nie dink dat hy gaan terugkom nie.

Dominee Rudiger kom haar besoek. Nadat sy koek en tee in die sitkamer bedien het, sit sy gespanne en wag vir die doel van sy besoek, bang vir wat hy vir haar gaan sê.

"Niclas het vir my geskryf, Marta."

Die seer wel in haar op. "Het hy?" Sy voel skielik vasgekeer en sit met haar rug teen die gemakstoel gedruk. "Hy skryf nie vir my nie. Het u hiernatoe gekom om vir my te sê dat ek Manitoba toe moet gaan? Dat ek 'n ongehoorsame vrou is en my aan Niclas moet onderwerp?"

Hy lyk hartseer en sit sy koppie en piering neer. Dan leun hy vooroor, vou sy hande en kyk haar in die oë. "Ek het gekom omdat ek weet hoe swaar hierdie skeiding vir julle albei moet wees. Ek het gekom om vir jou te sê hoe lief die Here vir jou is, en dat Hy nie vir jou 'n hart van vrees gegee het nie."

"God is lief vir my." Sy hoor die sarkasme in haar stem en kyk weg toe sy nie meer haar predikant se vriendelike blik kan beantwoord nie.

"Ja, Marta. God is lief vir jou. Hy het 'n plan vir jou."

"My ma het dit altyd vir my gesê. Ek weet Hy het 'n plan vir my." Sy gluur hom aan. "En 'n plan vir Niclas."

"'n Plan vir julle albei saam. God sal nie skei wat Hy saamgevoeg het nie."

Marta kan nie verby die knop in haar keel praat nie. Dominee Rudiger het nie kom vrae vra of kom sê wat sy moet doen nie. Toe hy opstaan, loop sy saam met hom tot by die deur. Nadat hy sy jas

vasgeknoop en sy hoed opgesit het, gaan Marta uit op die stoep. "Vergewe my, asseblief, dominee Rudiger." Terwyl die woorde oor haar lippe kom, onthou sy Elise se liggaam in die sneeu.

Dominee Rudiger draai na haar toe. Marta sien geen veroordeling in sy oë nie. "Ek en my vrou bid vir julle. Ons is baie lief vir julle. As jy enigiets nodig het, moet jy net vra."

Sy knip haar oë teen die trane. "Bid dat Niclas van plan verander en huis toe kom."

"Ons sal bid dat God se wil in ons elkeen se lewe geskied."

Daardie nag droom Marta van Mamma. "*Vlieg, Marta*." Sy sit op die stomp in die middel van die weiveld, 'n klein kruisie op die plek waar Elise begrawe is. "*Vlieg!*"

Marta wieg huilend heen en weer. "Ek het gevlieg, Mamma. Ek het!" Die wind waai en suis deur die bome. "Ek het my nes gebou."

Mamma verdwyn en Marta bevind haar in 'n woestyn. Haar voete is besig om in die sand weg te sak. Sy spartel verskrik en alleen, maar kan nie bo bly nie. Hoe meer sy skop en tekere gaan, hoe vinniger sink sy.

"Marta."

Haar hart bons toe sy Niclas se sagte stem hoor, en sy kyk op. Hy dra 'n soomlose wit kleed soos Jesus. Toe hy sy hand na haar toe uitsteek, gryp sy daarna. Die sand word deur die wind weggewaai en dan staan sy op vaste grond. Hy vou haar in sy arms toe en soen haar. Sy huil toe hy haar laat gaan. Hy hou sy hand weer na haar toe uit. "Kom, Marta." Voor haar staan daar 'n Bedoeïenetent.

Die volgende middag is daar 'n brief.

> *Liefste Marta*
>
> *Robert Madson het my 16 hektaar gegee om te bewerk. Hy het my ook saad, ses werkperde, 'n koei en 'n paar hoenders belowe. 'n Huis en wa kom saam met die werk. Aan die einde van elke oes sal ek in die wins deel.*
>
> *As jy kom, moet jy my 'n paar dae voor jou koms laat weet. Jy kan my by hierdie adres bereik ...*
>
> *Kom, asseblief. Ek wil jou weer in my arms hou.*

Sy huil terwyl sy die brief 'n tweede maal lees, verskeur deur verlange, maar verlam deur alles wat sy vrees en alles waarvoor sy verantwoordelik is. Dit is maklik vir hom om te sê sy moet *kom*. Hy besit niks nie. Sy kan nie net wegloop en alles los nie.

Sal sy op die vlaktes van Manitoba met sy winters onder vriespunt en sy skroeiende somers kan lewe? Sal sy in die middel van nêrens

kan bly waar hulle ’n kilometer van die naaste bure af is en ’n mens ’n halwe dag moet ry om voorraad op ’n klein plaasdorpie te gaan koop?

En hoe kan ’n man wat in Berlyn studeer het daarmee vir lief neem om lande te ploeg? Hoe kan hy ophou lokomotiewe en brûe ontwerp om ’n deelboer te word? Een of ander tyd sal hy van plan verander. En wat gaan dan gebeur?

Sy weet wat Mamma vir haar sou sê. “*Gaan, Marta!*” Maar Mamma se lewe was een van afsloof en pyn, smart en swaarkry. Sy kan Daisy Stockhard in haar rolstoel in die middel van Kew Gardens hoor haar sê dat sy op enige plek saam met haar man sou gaan woon.

Dit kom alles op een vraag neer: Sal sy ooit sonder Niclas gelukkig wees?

***

Marta raak yskoud toe sy die koerant lees. Hertog Franz Ferdinand van Oostenryk is deur ’n Serwiese soldaat doodgeskiet. Niclas was reg. Dit het die Oostenrykers die ideale geleentheid gebied om teen Serwië oorlog te verklaar. Kort voor lank sal die hele Europa by die gemors betrek word.

Rusland, as Oostenryk se bondgenoot, mobiliseer sy weermag om Oostenryk te help en doen ’n beroep op Frankryk, sy bondgenoot, om oorlog te verklaar. Dit het tot gevolg dat Duitsland teen Rusland en Frankryk oorlog verklaar. Toe Duitse troepe België binneval, stuur sir Edward Grey, Brittanje se buitelandse sekretaris, ’n ultimatum waarin hy Duitsland opdrag gee om sy troepe te onttrek. Duitsland weier en toe Brittanje teen hulle oorlog verklaar, word Kanada ook by die stryd betrek.

Teen die einde van Augustus het duisende Russe in die Slag van Tannenberg gesneuwel en is 125 000 gevange geneem. Groot Brittanje se bondgenoot, Japan, het teen Duitsland oorlog verklaar. Die Duitsers loods ’n aanval op die Russe by die Masurianmere en nog 45 000 word gevange geneem. Die Ottomaanse Ryk kom Duitsland te hulp in hulle verdere inname van België.

Marta voel bedruk. “Die wêreld het mal geword.”

Dan kry sy ’n brief van Rosie.

> *Die hele Europa word by hierdie naderende storm betrek. Dit is soos ’n argument wat tussen twee skoolseuns ontstaan het. Dan kom daar ander kinders wat aan hierdie of daardie kant help baklei, en kort*

*voor lank is daar 'n skare. Ag, Marta, ek is bevrees duisende mense gaan sterf as hierdie ding die pad loop wat my pa en broers voorspel. Ek dank God dat ek my tussen die berge van Switserland bevind en dat ons mans nie hoef te gaan veg nie ...*

*Jy weet hoe lief is ek vir jou. Jy is my beste vriendin. Dus voel ek ek het die reg om jou te vra: Waarom wag jy? Wat beteken 'n huis as die man wat jy liefhet nie meer daar bly nie? Uit alles wat jy vir my van Niclas geskryf het, weet ek dat hy nie soos jou pa is nie. Gaan na hom toe. Anders sal jy nooit gelukkig wees nie.*

Marta frommel die brief in haar hand op en huil. Dit sou beter gewees het as sy nooit verlief geraak het nie. Sy brand om by Niclas te wees. Haar lewe is ellendig sonder hom. Maar sy kan nie net gaan nie. Sy moet ook aan die baba dink. Niclas se baba.

Sy vryf oor haar groeiende maag. Sy onthou Solange se krete in haar barensnood. Sy onthou die bloed. Sal daar 'n vroedvrou in die middel van die vlaktes, kilometers van die beskawing af wees?

Carleen kom in met die pos. Sy skud haar kop en Marta weet daar het niks van Niclas gekom nie. Dis asof almal in die huis wag om van hom te hoor.

*Liefste Niclas*

*Vergewe my asseblief dat ek jou nie by die stasie gaan afsien het nie. Jy kan jouself seker skop dat jy met so 'n hardkoppige vrou getrou het.*

*Ek is bang om nou na Manitoba toe te kom. Ek het 'n vrou in Montreaux gehelp om geboorte te skenk. Ek weet wat dit behels. Dit is nog drie maande voordat ons baba kom, en dan sal ek tyd nodig hê om te herstel.*

*Ek wil nog nie die losieshuis verkoop nie. Dit het my jare geneem om daarvoor te spaar, en ek sal alles verloor wat ek op die herstelwerk en verf en meubels spandeer het. Dit gaan nie net oor die geld nie. Dis moontlik dat jy dalk ná 'n seisoen op die vlaktes van besluit kan verander. Sê nou daar kom 'n sprinkaanplaag en niks bly oor nie, of skimmel? Ons het 'n huis hier in Montreal. Ons het 'n manier om 'n bestaan te maak.*

*Ryk mense kan baie maklik beloftes maak, Niclas. Buiten Boas het ek nog nooit van 'n man gehoor wat sy werkers so goedgesind soos Herr Madson is nie. Sorg dat jy dit op skrif kry, anders gaan sy hande dalk na afloop van die oes vol wees, en joune vereelt en leeg.*

*Twee weke later ontvang sy sy antwoord.*

*My liefste vrou*

*Ek dank God. Ek het voortdurend gebid dat jou hart teenoor my sal*

*versag.*

*’n Man is net so goed soos sy woord. My ja is ja. God sê ons moenie besorg wees nie. Kyk na die voëls in die lug en die lelies in die veld, en sien hoe Hy hulle voed en klee. God sal ook na ons kyk. Wag totdat jy die skoonheid van hierdie land gesien het, die wuiwende koring soos golwe op ’n see. Jy is nooit alleen nie. God is by jou, Marta, en ek gaan ook by jou wees.*

*Maar ek verstaan jou vrees. Jy is God se geskenk aan my, my altyd-praktiese vrou. Soveel as wat ek jou mis, dink ek jy is reg. Bly in Montreal tot na ons baba se geboorte. Sodra jy gesond genoeg is en julle albei kan reis, kom julle na my toe. Laat weet my net vroegtydig sodat ek in Winnipeg sal wees om julle te ontmoet.*

Tussen die reëls deur verstaan Marta dat Niclas ’n kontrak geteken het wat bepaal dat hy die land sal bewerk, maar dat hy geen geskrewe beloftes van die eienaar ontvang het nie.

Sy sug en sluit haar oë, moeg vir die bakleiery. *Here, ek gee op. Wat moet ek doen?* In daardie oomblik van rus en stilte weet sy. Daar is ’n ligtheid in haar toe sy haar stoel terugstoot, die brief opvou en dit in haar voorskootsak steek. Sy kry Carleen in die waskamer. “Sodra die baba gekom het en ek sterk genoeg is, gaan ek Manitoba toe.”

Haar gesig val. “Dus gaan jy verkoop?”

“Nee. Ek gaan jou oplei om die plek te bestuur.”

“Vir my? O nee! Ek sal dit nooit kan doen nie!”

“Nonsens.” Sy vat ’n laken nadat Carleen dit deur die wringmasjien gevoer het en skud dit uit. “Jy is vyf jaar ouer as ek en jy het jou skoolloopbaan voltooi. As ek dit kan doen, kan jy beslis.” Sy lag. “Die heel belangrikste is om die leeus versadig te hou.”

## Chapter 13

**1915**

Joy filled Marta when she saw Niclas waiting for her. He looked tan and lean, his face intent as he looked from car to car. When he saw her, he smiled broadly. Laughing, she lifted their son, swaddled in a blanket Carleen had given her, so Niclas could see him through the train window.

Gone was the anger that had consumed her during the hours of her travail, when she had felt deserted by Niclas. Still, the anger had helped her press through the pain. She had cried out only once, when her body forced Bernhard into the world and he screamed in protest. Carleen washed and swaddled him in blankets and handed him over to Marta. A bubble of joy came and she laughed. She had never thought she would ever have a husband, let alone a child, and now God had given her both. A brief cloud darkened the moment as she thought of Elise and her child dying in the cold. But she pressed it away and drank in the sight of her newborn son nursing, his small hand pressed against her flesh.

Niclas ran and caught up with the passenger car, then strode alongside until it came to a full halt. Paying a porter to gather her things and collect her trunk, she headed for the door.

"Marta." Niclas waited for her at the bottom of the steps, his blue eyes moist. He steadied her with a firm hand beneath her elbow. "I thought you'd never come." Giving her a quick kiss on the cheek, he drew the blanket down so he could get a better look at his son.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" Her voice quavered.

He raised eyes. *"Ja. Wunderschön."* He slipped his arm around her. "Come. Let's get your things loaded into the wagon. We're staying overnight at a hotel before heading out to the farm tomorrow morning."

She looked up at him. "English, Niclas, or have you forgotten already?"

He laughed. "Let me have him." She deposited the baby carefully into his waiting arms. Niclas held him close against his heart, gazing down at him in wonder. The baby awakened. "Bernhard Niclas Waltert, I am your papa. *Mein Sohn.*" Tears slipped down Niclas's bronzed cheeks as he kissed him. *"Mein Sohn."*

Marta felt an odd twisting inside her. "And if he'd been a daughter, would you have loved him as much?" Niclas raised his

head, gaze questioning. She didn't repeat the question.

When they reached the hotel room, Niclas took Bernhard from the basket where Marta had settled him. "I want to see him." He laid the baby on the bed and unwrapped the blanket. Marta protested.

"He fussed half the night. I hardly slept."

"I'll hold him if he fusses."

"And will you nurse him, too?"

Niclas looked at her. "So sharp, Marta." He returned his attention to their son, who awakened and began to kick his legs and cry. Niclas lifted him. "I have not seen you in nearly a year, and this is the first day I have laid eyes on my son. Do you begrudge my being eager to hold him?"

His reprimand stung. They could have been together all this time. She could have come into Winnipeg that last week or two and had the services of a midwife. She was his wife and belonged at his side. She watched him pace the room with Bernhard in his arms. Turning away, she unpacked the diapers, baby clothing, and blankets she would need for that night, afraid she would cry. Bernhard cried instead, and Marta felt her milk let down. Pressing her arms against her breasts, she tried to stop the moisture from seeping. Bernhard cried harder.

"What's wrong with him?" Niclas sounded distressed.

She turned and held out her arms. "He's hungry."

Niclas returned the child to her arms and stood watching as she sat on the far side of the bed facing a wall. Head down, back to her husband, she opened her shirtwaist. She jerked slightly as Bernhard took hold and suckled. When Niclas came and sat down beside her, she blushed and raised the blanket over her shoulder. Niclas drew it down again. "Don't hide from me." His expression filled with wonder.

She stood and moved away as she shifted Bernhard to the other side. Niclas watched her. When Bernhard made a loud noise, he laughed. Marta laughed, too. "In one end and out the other." When she finished nursing Bernhard, she flipped out a blanket on the bed and changed his diaper.

Niclas stood over him. "He's perfect. God has given us a great gift." When he brushed the tiny, star-shaped hand with his finger, Bernhard grasped hold. "Strong, too. *Unser kleiner Bärenjunge.*"

"Yes, and our little bear cub will probably keep us awake all through the night."

Niclas scooped him up. "You won't do that to your papa, will you?" He nuzzled him and whispered in his ear.

Someone knocked on the door, turning Marta's attention away. She opened the door wide so the servant could bring in a dinner tray. Marta paid the man and closed the door behind him. Niclas put Bernhard in the middle of the double bed while they ate dinner. Bernhard cooed and kicked, making fists and swinging his arms. "He's wide-awake, isn't he?"

"Unfortunately." Marta sighed.

Niclas lifted the baby and jostled him. After a while, he put the baby in the middle of the bed and stretched out beside him, dangling a rattle over Bernhard. Marta sat in the chair, barely able to keep her eyes open. Giving up, she closed her eyes as she listened to baby coos and Niclas's soft chuckle. She awakened when Niclas lifted her. "Bernhard?"

Niclas placed her gently in the middle of the bed. "Asleep in his basket." When he began to unbutton her shirtwaist, Marta came fully awake. As he looked into her eyes, he brushed his fingers against her throat and leaned down to kiss her. She felt everything inside her open and grow warm. She removed his shirt, and she found that months of hard physical labor had thickened the muscles across his chest and down his arms. When he lifted his mouth from hers, she felt herself drowning at the look in his eyes. "I'll be gentle." And at first he was, until her response gave them both the freedom they needed.

Pulling the blankets up over them, Niclas tucked her against his body. He let out a long, deep sigh of contentment. "I was afraid you would never come. You had everything you wanted in Montreal."

"I didn't have you."

"So you missed me?"

She raised his blistered and callused hand and kissed his palm.

He nuzzled her neck. "God has answered my prayers."

"For now. We'd better both start praying the seed you planted will sprout and the weather will—"

Niclas put a finger to her lips. "Let's not worry about tomorrow." They both went still as Bernhard cried softly in his basket. Niclas gave a soft laugh. "Today's trouble is enough." Flipping the covers back, he walked naked across the room and lifted their son from the basket.

* * *

Every mile that passed furthered Marta's dismay. As Niclas snapped the reins over the horses and clicked his tongue, she could only stare at the flat land before her. She didn't see a hill anywhere, but endless prairie that reminded her of the ocean crossing. She felt a

little queasy.

"Are there any trees where we're going?" She removed her jacket and wished she could unbutton her shirtwaist.

Niclas glanced at her. "We have a tree in our front yard."

"One tree?"

"Right where we need it."

She wiped beads of moisture from her forehead. Dust chafed her skin beneath her clothing. She glanced over the seat at Bernhard in the basket behind her, sleeping contentedly in the wagon bouncing over the dirt road. Marta remembered the canyon of buildings in the heart of Montreal, the trolleys and a few of the new automobiles.

"There it is!" Niclas pointed, face beaming.

She saw a small house in the distance, squat and sturdy, shaded by one tree. A barn and shed stood nearby. Four horses grazed in an enclosed pasture while a thin cow stood, head drooping, inside a corral next to the barn. "That cow is sick, Niclas."

"Madson said she could give milk."

"Has she?"

"None so far." He shrugged. "I don't know much about cows."

*Oh, God, help us.* "You didn't know anything about growing wheat either, and you said you have planted a lot of it. I know a little about cows." She could always write and ask Arik Brechtwald's advice. He'd grown up around cows. "You said Madson gave you chickens too."

"One rooster and four hens."

"Where are they?"

"Off somewhere scratching for food, I guess."

He guessed? "Are they laying eggs?"

"I haven't had time to look." He pointed. "There's the rooster now."

The rooster strutted out from behind the barn, two hens following. She waited, but the others didn't appear. Annoyed, she imagined a very happy fox sleeping somewhere close by. The chickens scattered again as Niclas drove the wagon into the yard. As the rooster flapped away, the hens gave chase.

Niclas jumped off the wagon and came around to help her. She put her hands on his shoulders as he lifted her down. "The first thing we have to do is build a henhouse. Otherwise we'll lose them all."

He lifted the basket and handed it to her. "Why don't you go on in the house while I unload everything?"

She looked around, fighting the sick feeling in her stomach. No mountains anywhere, not as far as she could see. And Niclas hadn't lied. They had one tree, and it was too small to cast a shadow over the house. *Oh, God, oh, God* . . . "How cold does it get out here?"

"Oh, cold enough." He hefted the trunk onto his shoulder. "The creek freezes so thick you have to make a hole in the ice so the livestock can get to water. Liam Helgerson, our neighbor, showed me how to do it. He has cattle."

She looked around again and followed him inside the house. "What'll we do for firewood?"

"We don't need wood. We have prairie chips!"

"Prairie chips?"

"Dried cow dung." He put the trunk on the floor. "Helgerson has a herd. He told me to take all I need. I pick them up by the wagonload and store them in one of the stalls in the barn. The chips fuel the stove, too. It makes the meat taste peppered."

"Peppered?"

"What's in the trunk that makes it so heavy?"

"Books." She had spent hard-earned money trying to prepare for any eventuality.

"Books?"

"On farming, home medicine, animal husbandry." She followed him outside as he headed back to the wagon. She put her hands on her hips. "You didn't write anything to me about chips. Any more good news you have to tell me?"

* * *

Managing a boardinghouse had been easy compared to farming. Marta carried Bernhard in a shawl tied around herself while she put in a vegetable garden and tended the chickens. Niclas worked all day in the fields, coming in only for a noon meal before going out again. His hands blistered and bled. He didn't complain, but she would see him wince when he pulled the work gloves off at night. She gave him a pan of warm water with salt to soak his hands and then wrapped them in strips of cloth. After dinner, while she nursed Bernhard, Niclas read to her from his Bible.

Liam Helgerson came over to meet Marta. He was a big man, lean and weathered after years in a saddle overseeing his landholdings. He had turned over much of his land to sharecroppers like Niclas, but still had enough to run a small herd of fine cattle. His wife had died five years before Niclas arrived. Both lonely, they had struck up a

friendship. Marta knew after a few weeks that Niclas wouldn't have a crop to harvest if not for Liam Helgerson's good advice.

"Niclas shot a pheasant this morning, Mr. Helgerson. Would you like to stay for dinner?"

His leathered face wrinkled in a broad smile. "I was hoping you'd ask, Mrs. Waltert. Niclas has told me what a fine cook you are."

He came once a week after that, usually on Sunday. Other than seeing that the animals and chickens were fed, it was the one day Niclas rested. Marta served dinner midafternoon so Liam wouldn't have to ride home in the dark. While Bernhard played on the rug, Niclas read portions of the Bible aloud as Marta sewed or knitted and Liam sat, head back, eyes half-closed, listening.

"I feel like I've been to church when I come over here. Margaret and I went a couple of times a year when we went into Winnipeg. She got some kind of cancer. It's a long, mean kind of dying. I . . ." Liam shook his head and looked out toward the fields. "Been a long time since I've felt any peace." He raked his hand back through his gray hair and put on his hat. He looked like a lonely old soul.

That night she mentioned her observations to Niclas, as he held Bernhard on his lap. "Liam seems so alone."

"He is alone except for the men who work for him."

"He and his wife never had children?"

"They had three, but they all died before they reached adulthood. They lost two in the same week to measles; the other got kicked in the head by a horse." He set Bernhard on the floor with a pile of blocks. "I'd better see to the animals."

Marta imagined the sorrow Liam must feel and shuddered at the thought of losing Bernhard. How would she bear it? If Bernhard was to become ill, how long would it take to reach a doctor? She must learn enough to doctor him herself. Her mother had shown her the medicinal herbs that grew in the Alpine meadows, but she would have to order a book on what grew here in this windswept prairie.

Leaning over, she ran her hand lovingly over Bernhard's blond head. *Please, God, keep him healthy. Make him strong like his father.*

* * *

*Dearest Marta,*

*I thank God you crossed the Atlantic when you did. You had only to worry about icebergs, but now the danger is man-made and moves at will beneath the surface. Father read to us this morning that a German U-boat sank the Lusitania off the Old Head of Kinsale,*

*Ireland. Over eleven hundred people went down with the ship. Several hundred were American citizens, and Father believes this will bring America into the fighting.*

*The war grows with no end in sight. Men are dying by the thousands in trenches. Arik, Hermann, and my brothers are all on active duty. I have heard rumors that our men will blow up the roads if they must.*

*The entire country is on alert. I pray our leaders can keep us out of the fray. . . .*

Marta prayed constantly for Rosie and Arik. She prayed for her brother, Hermann. She prayed Switzerland would stay out of the war.

* * *

The hens began laying more eggs than the family could eat. Marta took only what she needed and let the hens sit on the rest. Soon she had a dozen chickens and two roosters fighting for dominance. Having watched Niclas do it the first time, Marta built a second coop and separated the males, giving half the hens to each. She beat out and ground enough grain for feed.

The cow's health improved under Marta's watchful care. One Sunday when Liam Helgerson came over for his chicken dinner, she asked if she might pasture the bovine with one of his best bulls. "You can have the calf when it's weaned or a portion of the cheese I hope to make."

"I'll take the cheese. You've got yourself an enterprising wife, Waltert."

"She had her own boardinghouse when I met her in Montreal."

"Then what are you doing out here on the plains?"

Marta gave a short laugh. "I asked him the same thing." When Niclas's face tightened, she changed the subject. "You can change your mind about the calf, Mr. Helgerson. Being Swiss doesn't mean I know how to make cheese."

He laughed. "Maybe not, but I've no doubt you'll learn."

Niclas plowed and sowed winter wheat. While he waited for the crops to grow, he hired out to clean wells. Sometimes he would be gone for several days. Marta tried to get used to the silence and loneliness of the prairie, but it wore on her nerves.

"Helgerson said there's a soft-coal mine five miles from us," Niclas announced one evening. "I can dig out whatever we can use and sell the rest in Brandon." He stored the coal in the basement. Marta covered the coal with a tarp to keep the black dust from

seeping through the floorboards.

When the weather turned, Niclas moved the coops into the barn and piled bales of hay around three sides to keep them warm. Then the snows came, and Marta looked out on a frozen wasteland.

Niclas and Mr. Helgerson went out with axes to cut holes in the frozen river so the horses and cattle could drink. Niclas returned home so stiff from cold he needed her help to walk through the door. Marta spent the rest of the night tending him, afraid he would lose his ears, fingers, and toes.

"We're going home to Montreal when the thaw comes!"

"No, we can't. I signed a four-year contract."

Four years? She wept. "I hate this place! What happens when the holes you chopped fill with snow and ice? What if you end up in a blizzard and can't find your way home? What if—?"

"I'm all right." Niclas gripped Marta's head between his bandaged hands and kissed her hard. "Don't frighten our son."

Bernhard sat in his crib, crying loudly.

She put her hands over his. "And what will our son do without his father?" She stood and went to lift Bernhard from his crib.

Niclas wiggled his fingers at them. "See? I am thawing nicely." When she glared at him, he sighed. "Bring him to me." Bernhard never cried long in his father's arms.

Marta threw more prairie chips into the woodstove while Niclas played with their son. "You can't keep the cold out of this house!" She left the stove door open and rolled rags, stuffing them tightly against the space under the door. "If we have to stay three more years in this godforsaken place, then we're going to dam the creek so you won't have to risk your life cutting holes in that frozen river."

Shortly after they began the project, a neighbor to the south appeared on horseback. Niclas had gone hunting with Mr. Helgerson, leaving Marta alone to fill in the gaps between the larger boulders he had set. Seeing the rider coming, Marta waded out and untied her skirt from above her knees. She lifted Bernhard and set him on her hip as the man came closer. "So that's why the water's so low. What do you think you're doing? You can't dam this stream. The United States owns the water rights."

"No one told me."

"Consider yourself told." He swung his horse around and rode back the way he came.

Marta set Bernhard down and put her hands on her hips,

watching him until he disappeared in the distance. She went back to stacking stones. When Niclas returned that afternoon, she told him. He ran his hand around the back of his neck and rubbed.

"Well, if it's the law, we'll respect it."

"If it's the law, it's unjust! The stream goes through this land, Canadian land! Our animals need water in winter. Why should you go two miles to cut a hole in the river when we can make a pond half a mile from the house?"

"I'll see what Helgerson has to say."

Mr. Helgerson came over to help dismantle the dam. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Waltert." He heaved stones onto the bank.

"Not half as sorry as Niclas is going to be by the time he finishes digging us a well!" Swinging Bernhard up in her arms, she headed back for the house.

* * *

Robert Madson came after the second harvest. Marta took an immediate and intense dislike to the man with his bulging belly and fancy new automobile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Waltert. I see you're expecting another baby." He bent and pinched Bernhard's cheek. "You've got a grand little fellow here."

Marta served dinner and noticed how Madson didn't hesitate to take the platter of chicken first and pick the best for himself without thought of leaving an equal share for anyone else. When the men went out onto the new porch Niclas had built, she overheard Madson say prices were down this year and he hadn't made as much profit as he had hoped. When she came to the door, Niclas took one look at her and suggested he and Madson take a walk about the place to see the improvements he and Marta had made.

Furious, Marta left the dishes stacked and brought a chair outside. She let Bernhard play in the dirt while she watched the two men. They didn't walk far, but stood talking outside the barn. Niclas walked out toward the field and Madson headed back toward the house. Marta noticed the stoop of Niclas's shoulders. She stood as Madson came closer. "Leaving so soon?" She didn't try to take the chill from her voice.

"I'll have someone come and get the cow."

"You will not."

He looked surprised. "It's my cow."

"That cow is part of our contract, Mr. Madson." She had seen enough to know the man cared nothing about those who worked for

him, least of all whether they had enough to eat. "We must have milk for our children." She put her hand on her swollen abdomen to press her point.

"I'll give you another cow."

"I spent months nursing that cow back to health. Our son will not go without milk while I tend another one of your sick cows." She jabbed her finger toward the field. "That cow stays right where it is."

His face flushed red. "Then I'll take the calf."

"Only if you fathered it."

His eyes darkened. "You're a hard woman, Mrs. Waltert."

She glared back at him, undaunted. He reminded her of Herr Keller. "Hard, yes, but not hard-hearted like you." Niclas would keep his word to this man, but it remained to be seen whether Madson would keep his word to Niclas. She doubted it.

His gaze shifted. He looked here and there. When he spotted the coops Niclas had moved outside the barn, his eyes gleamed. "If I can't have the calf, I'll take the chickens."

"Of course. You can have your rooster and four hens. That's what belongs to you. And I will fetch them for you right now." She stepped off the porch and headed toward the smaller coop. Pausing, she looked back at him. "Do you want them dead and plucked, or alive and kicking?" She looked pointedly at his nice new automobile. "They tend to make a mess."

"Put them in a crate."

"Do you have one in your backseat?"

"Oh, never mind!" Slapping dust off his hat, he headed for his dusty black car. "We'll settle up at the end of the contract!"

She stood, arms akimbo. "I know the price of wheat. I asked in Brandon. Don't take me for a fool!"

"Your husband signed a contract!" He squeezed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. "Everything on this place belongs to me!"

"We are not slaves. And workers are owed their wages! God sees what you do, Mr. Madson! And God will judge between you and my husband!"

Dust billowed up behind him as he drove away.

Marta fumed the rest of the afternoon. When Niclas came in for dinner, she released her pent-up anger. "You wait and see, Niclas." She took another roasted chicken from the oven. "That man is not going to pay you anything when the contract is up." She kicked the oven door shut. "He thinks we're his serfs!" She yanked the lid off the

pan and sent it clattering into the washbasin. “You added a porch to the house and dug a well, and what thanks did you get? He wanted to steal our cow and all our chickens! The man is a liar and a thief. And now you know it. You know as well as I do he’ll find an excuse to weasel out of his part of the contract and you’ll have nothing after four years of hard work. We should pack up and go right now.”

Niclas spoke quietly. “I gave my word.”

“What about *his* word?”

“My word is what matters. My yes is yes.” He looked so weary. “That chicken smells good.”

Marta cleaved the roasted bird in half and put it on the platter. “Next time you’re in town, Niclas, buy another gun.”

He looked up in alarm. “You’re not planning on shooting the man, are you?”

“I’d like to shoot him!” She put the platter on the table and slumped in her chair. “Rabbits are getting into the vegetable garden, and I saw a deer yesterday. I think they know when you’re out hunting and they come here for lunch. If I eat any more chicken, I’ll sprout feathers. Get me a rifle, and we’ll have venison and rabbit stew!”

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*What I feared is happening. Niclas is being cheated by Madson, and I’m going to have our second child in the dead of winter, twenty-five miles away from the nearest town and midwife.*

*Niclas went to town without me last time. This baby isn’t sitting as well as Bernhard, and I didn’t want to take any risks riding so far on a bouncing wagon. Niclas had three crates of chickens, butter, and eggs to sell, but came home with empty pockets. Mr. Ingersoll gave him credit at the general store. I told Niclas credit is fine, but cash is better.*

*I have never seen a man work so hard. But at the end of his contract with that thief Madson, he will have nothing to show for it but muscle and calluses.*

# Hoofstuk 13

## 1915

Marta se hart klop opgewonde toe sy Niclas vir haar sien wag. Hy lyk bruingebrand en lenig, sy oë soekend terwyl sy blik oor die waens beweeg. Toe hy haar sien, glimlag hy breed. Hulle seuntjie is in 'n kombersie toegewikkel wat Carleen vir haar gegee het en sy lag toe sy hom optel sodat Niclas hom deur die treinvenster kan sien.

Skoonveld is die verterende woede wat sy in die ure van haar barensnood gehad het toe sy deur Niclas versaak gevoel het. Tog, die woede het haar gehelp om deur die pyn te beur. Sy het net een maal gegil, toe haar liggaam klein Bernhard in die wêreld forseer het en hy protesterend geskree het. Carleen het hom gewas en in komberse toegedraai en vir Marta gegee. Die vreugde het in haar opgeborrel en sy het gelag. Sy het nie gedink dat sy ooit 'n man sou hê nie, laat staan nog 'n kind, en nou het God haar albei gegee. Daar was vlugtig 'n donker wolk toe sy aan Elise en haar baba in die sneeu gedink het. Maar sy het dit opsy geskuif en die prentjie van haar pasgebore seuntjie teen haar bors gekoester, sy handjie teen haar vel.

Niclas haal hulle in en draf langs die passasierswa totdat dit heeltemal tot stilstand kom. Nadat sy 'n portier betaal het om haar bagasie te neem en haar trommel te gaan haal, gaan sy na die deur toe.

"Marta." Niclas staan onder die trappies vir haar en wag, sy blou oë blink van die trane. Hy ondersteun haar met 'n ferm hand onder die elmboog. "Ek het gedink jy gaan nooit kom nie." Hy gee haar 'n vinnige soen op die wang en trek die kombers weg sodat hy sy seuntjie van nader kan beskou.

"Hy's pragtig, nè?" Haar stem bewe.

Hy kyk op. "*Ja. Wunderschön.*" Hy slaan sy arm om haar. "Kom ons laai jou goed in die wa. Ons bly vanaand oor in 'n hotel voordat ons môre-oggend plaas toe ry."

Sy kyk op na hom. “Engels, Niclas, of het jy alreeds vergeet?”

Hy lag. “Gee hom vir my.” Sy plaas die baba versigtig in sy wagtende arms. Niclas hou hom teen sy hart terwyl hy vol verwondering na hom kyk. Die baba word wakker. “Bernhard Niclas Waltert, ek is jou pappa. *Mein Sohn.*” Trane loop oor Niclas se sonbruin wange toe hy hom soen. “*Mein Sohn.*”

Marta voel ’n vreemde roering in haar binneste. “En as hy ’n dogter was, sou jy net so lief vir hom gewees het?” Niclas kyk op, sy oë vraend. Sy herhaal nie die vraag nie.

Toe hulle die hotelkamer bereik, haal Niclas vir Bernhard uit die mandjie waarin Marta hom neergelê het. “Ek wil na hom kyk.” Hy sit die baba op die bed neer en vou die komberse oop. Marta protesteer.

“Hy was die hele nag onrustig. Ek het skaars geslaap.”

“Ek sal hom vashou as hy huil.”

“En gaan jy hom voed?”

Niclas kyk na haar. “So skerp, Marta?” Hy wend hom weer tot hulle seuntjie. Dié het intussen wakker geword en skop met sy beentjies en huil. Niclas tel hom op. “Ek het jou amper ’n jaar gelede gesien, en dit is die eerste maal dat ek my kind sien. Gun jy my nie my gretigheid om hom vas te hou nie?”

Sy teregwysing maak seer. Hulle kon hierdie hele tyd bymekaar gewees het. Sy kon daardie laaste week of twee na Winnipeg toe gekom het en die dienste van ’n vroedvrou gekry het. Sy is sy vrou en hoort aan sy sy. Marta kyk hoe hy met Bernhard op en af deur die vertrek loop. Sy draai weg en begin die doeke, babaklere en komberse uitpak wat sy vir die nag nodig het, bang dat sy gaan huil. Maar dis Bernhard wat begin huil en Marta voel hoe haar melk inkom. Sy druk haar arms teen haar borste in ’n poging om te keer dat die nattigheid deursypel. Bernhard huil harder.

“Wat is fout met hom?” Niclas klink benoud.

Sy draai om en steek haar arms uit. “Hy is honger.”

Nadat Niclas die kind vir haar gegee het, staan hy na haar en kyk toe sy op die ander kant van die bed gaan sit. Kop geboë, en met haar rug na haar man, maak sy haar bloesie oop. Sy ruk effens toe Bernhard begin drink. Toe Niclas langs haar kom sit, bloos sy en trek die kombers oor haar skouer. Niclas trek dit weer af. “Moenie vir my wegkruip nie.” Sy gesig is vol verwondering.

Sy staan op en beweeg weg toe sy Bernhard aan die ander kant laat drink. Niclas se oë los haar nie vir ’n oomblik nie. Toe Bernhard ’n harde geluid maak, lag hy. Marta lag ook. “Die een kant in en die

ander kant uit." Toe sy klaar is, sprei sy 'n kombers oor die bed en ruil sy doek.

Niclas staan bo-oor hom. "Hy is volmaak. God het vir ons 'n groot geskenk gegee." Toe hy die klein, stervormige handjie met sy vinger streel, gryp Bernard hom vas. "Sterk, ook. *Unsere kleinen Bärenjunge*."

"Ja, en ons klein beerwelpie gaan ons waarskynlik die hele nag wakker hou."

Niclas tel hom op. "Jy sal dit tog seker nie aan jou pappa doen nie?" Hy soen hom in sy nek en fluister in sy oortjie.

Marta draai weg toe iemand aan die deur klop. Sy maak die deur groot oop sodat 'n kelner die skinkbord kan inbring. Dan betaal sy die man en maak die deur agter hom toe. Niclas plaas Bernhard in die middel van die bed terwyl hulle eet. Bernhard koer terwyl hy skop en met sy vuisies swaai. "Lyk my hy is wawyd wakker."

"Ongelukkig." Marta sug.

Niclas tel die baba op hou hom styf vas. Na 'n rukkie sit hy hom op die bed neer en gaan lê langs hom en wikkel 'n ratel bokant hom. Marta sit op die stoel en worstel tevergeefs om haar oë oop te hou. Later gee sy in en sluit haar oë terwyl sy na die baba se gekoer en Niclas se sagte laggie luister. Sy word wakker toe Niclas haar optel. "Bernhard?"

Niclas lê haar sagkens in die middel van die bed neer. "Vas aan die slaap in sy mandjie." Toe hy haar bloesie begin losknoop, word Marta helder wakker. Sy oë bly in hare terwyl hy oor haar keel streel en sy kop laat sak om haar te soen. Sy voel hoe alles binne-in haar oopgaan en 'n warmte deur haar versprei. Toe sy haar man se hemp uittrek, ontdek sy dat die maande se harde fisiese arbeid die spiere in sy bors en arms verhard het. Uiteindelik lig hy sy mond van hare, en dit voel vir haar asof sy in sy oë verdrink. "Ek sal sag met jou wees." En aanvanklik is hy, totdat haar reaksie hulle albei vrye teuels gee.

Nadat hy die kombers oor hulle getrek het, vou hy haar teen hom vas. Hy slaak 'n lang sug van tevredenheid. "Ek was bang dat jy nooit gaan kom nie. Jy het alles in Montreal gehad wat jy wou hê."

"Ek het nie vir jou gehad nie."

"So jy het my gemis?"

Sy lig sy vereelte hand en soen hom op sy palm.

Hy druk sy gesig in haar nek. "God het my gebede verhoor."

"Vir nou. Ons beter nou albei begin bid dat die saad sal groei en dat die weer sal – "

Niclas plaas 'n vinger teen haar lippe. "Kom ons bekommer ons nie

oor môre nie." Hulle albei word stil toe Bernhard saggies in sy mandjie begin huil. Niclas gee 'n sagte laggie. "Vandag het genoeg van sy eie sorge." Hy gooi die kombers terug en loop naak deur die kamer om hulle seuntjie op te tel.

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Marta voel haar moedeloosheid met elke kilometer groter word. Terwyl Niclas die perde liggies met die leisels piets en met sy tong klik, kan sy net na die plat landskap voor haar staar. Daar is nêrens 'n heuwel in sig nie, net die eindelose prêrie wat haar aan die bootvaart herinner. Sy voel 'n bietjie naar.

"Is daar enige bome waar ons bly?" Sy trek haar baadjie uit en wens sy kon haar bloesie oopknoop.

Niclas kyk na haar. "Daar is 'n boom in ons voortuin."

"Een boom?"

"Net waar ons dit nodig het."

Sy vee die sweet van haar voorkop af. Die stof irriteer haar vel onder haar klere. Sy kyk om na Bernhard in sy mandjie, rustig aan die slaap in die wa wat oor die grondpad skommel. Marta onthou die canyons van geboue in die hart van Montreal, die trolliebusse en 'n paar van die nuwe motors.

"Daar is dit!" Niclas wys met 'n stralende gesig.

In die verte, in die skadu van 'n enkele boom, kan sy 'n vierkantige, stewige huisie uitmaak. 'n Entjie daarvandaan staan 'n skuur en nog 'n buitegebou. Vier perde wei in 'n omheinde veldjie en 'n maer koei staan koponderstebo in 'n kraal langs die skuur. "Daardie koei is nie gesond nie, Niclas."

"Madson het gesê sy kan melk gee."

"Het sy?"

"Tot dusver nog nie." Hy haal sy skouers op. "Ek weet nie veel van koeie nie."

*Ag, Here, help ons*. "Jy het nie veel van koring geweet nie, en jy het gesê jy het baie daarvan gesaai. Ek weet 'n bietjie van koeie af." Sy kan altyd skryf en Arik Brechtwald se advies vra. Hy het met koeie grootgeword. "Jy het gesê Madson het vir jou hoenders ook gegee."

"Een haan en vier henne."

"Waar is hulle?"

"Seker maar iewers besig om te skrop."

Seker maar? “Lê hulle eiers?”

“Ek het nog nie tyd gehad om te gaan kyk nie.” Hy wys met sy vinger. “Daar kom die haan nou.”

Die haan kom windmakerig om die skuur gestap, twee henne op sy hakke. Sy wag, maar die ander maak nie hulle verskyning nie. Met ’n gevoel van ergerlikheid dink sy aan ’n baie gelukkige jakkals wat iewers in die omgewing lê en slaap. Die hoenders spat uitmekaar toe Niclas by die werf inry. Toe die haan met vlerkgeklap koers kry, slaan die henne ook ’n rigting in.

Niclas spring van die wa af en kom help haar. Sy plaas haar hande op sy skouers toe hy haar aftel. “Die eerste ding wat ons moet doen, is om ’n hoenderhok te bou. Anders gaan ons hulle almal verloor.”

Hy tel die mandjie uit en gee dit vir haar. “Hoekom gaan jy nie solank in terwyl ek alles aflaai nie?”

Sy moet teen die naar kol op haar maag baklei terwyl sy om haar rondkyk. Daar is nêrens ’n berg in sig nie, nie sover sy kan sien nie. En Niclas het nie gejok nie. Hulle het een boom, en dié is te klein om ’n skadu oor die huis te gooi. *O, Here, o, Here …* “Hoe koud word dit hier?”

“Ag, koud genoeg.” Hy hys die trommel op sy skouer. “Die ys op die rivier raak so dik dat jy ’n gat moet maak sodat die diere by die water kan uitkom. Liam Helgerson, ons buurman, het my gewys hoe om dit te doen. Hy het beeste.”

Sy kyk weer rond en volg hom toe hy by die huis ingaan. “Wat gaan ons maak vir brandhout?”

“Ons het nie hout nodig nie. Ons het prêriebolle!”

“Prêriebolle?”

“Gedroogde beesmis.” Hy sit die trommel neer. “Helgerson het ’n trop. Hy het gesê ek kan soveel kry as wat ek nodig het. Ek gaan haal wavragte en stoor hulle in een van die stalle in die skuur. Die bolle word ook in die stoof gebruik. Dit gee die vleis ’n pepersmaak.”

“Peper?”

“Wat is in die trommel wat dit so swaar maak?”

“Boeke.” Sy het van haar swaarverdiende geld spandeer in ’n poging om vir enige gebeurlikheid voorbereid te wees.

“Boeke?”

“Oor boerdery, noodhulp, veeteelt.” Sy volg hom na buite toe hy weer na die wa toe gaan. Sy plaas haar hande op haar heupe. “Jy het niks vir my oor bolle geskryf nie. Nog enige goeie nuus wat jy my wil vertel?”

* * *

Om ’n losieshuis te bestuur blyk baie makliker te wees as om te boer. Marta dra Bernhard in ’n sjaal op haar rug terwyl sy ’n groentetuin aanplant en die hoenders versorg. Niclas werk heeldag in die lande en kom twaalfuur net vinnig in vir iets te ete. Sy hande maak blase en bloei. Hy kla nie, maar sy sien hom gryns wanneer hy saans sy werkhandskoene uittrek. Sy gee hom ’n pan warm water met sout waarin hy sy hande kan week en dan verbind sy hulle. Ná ete, wanneer sy Bernhard voed, lees Niclas vir haar uit die Bybel.

Liam Helgerson kom deur om Marta te ontmoet. Hy is ’n groot man, lenig en seningrig na jare se boer en ure in ’n saal. Hy het baie van sy grond aan deelboere soos Niclas beskikbaar gestel, maar het steeds genoeg om ’n klein trop uitsoekbeeste aan te hou. Sy vrou is vyf jaar voor Niclas se koms oorlede. Die twee alleenlopers het kort voor lank bevriend geraak. Ná ’n paar weke weet Marta dat Niclas nie ’n oes sou gehad het as dit nie vir Liam Helgerson se goeie raad was nie.

“Niclas het vanoggend ’n fisant geskiet, meneer Helgerson. Wil u bly vir aandete?”

Sy verweerde gesig verkreukel in ’n breë glimlag. “Ek het gehoop u vra, mevrou Waltert. Niclas het my al vertel hoe ’n goeie kok u is.”

Daarna kom hy een maal ’n week, gewoonlik op ’n Sondag. Buiten om seker te maak dat die diere en hoenders gevoer is, is dit die een dag waarop Niclas rus. Marta sorg dat die kos teen die middag gereed is sodat Liam nie na donker hoef huis toe te ry nie. Bernhard speel op die mat en Niclas lees gedeeltes uit die Bybel terwyl Marta naaldwerk doen en Liam ontspanne en met versluierde oë sit en luister.

“Dit voel of ek by die kerk was wanneer ek hiernatoe kom. Ek en Margaret het ’n paar keer ’n jaar gegaan wanneer ons Winnipeg toe is. Sy het een of ander soort kanker gekry. Dit is ’n lang, uitmergelende manier van doodgaan. Ek ... ” Liam skud sy kop en kyk na die lande. “Dis die eerste maal in ’n lang tyd dat ek vrede het.” Hy trek sy hande deur sy grys hare en sit sy hoed op. Hy lyk na ’n eensame ou siel.

Daardie aand deel sy haar gedagtes met Niclas waar hy met Bernhard op sy skoot sit. “Liam lyk so alleen.”

“Hy is alleen behalwe vir die mans wat vir hom werk.”

“Het hy en sy vrou nie kinders gehad nie?”

“Hulle het drie gehad, maar almal is dood toe hulle nog klein was. Twee is binne een week aan masels oorlede. Die ander een is deur ’n perd teen die kop geskop.” Hy sit Bernhard op die vloer by sy blokkies

neer. "Ek moet na die diere gaan kyk."

Marta kan haar Liam se hartseer net voorstel en ril as sy daaraan dink dat hulle Bernhard moet verloor. Hoe sal sy dit oorleef? Hoe lank sal dit hulle neem om by 'n dokter uit te kom as Bernhard moet siek word? Sy moet genoeg leer om hom self te kan behandel. Haar ma het haar geleer van die medisinale kruie wat in die Alpe groei, maar sy sal 'n boek moet bestel oor wat in hierdie windverwaaide prêrie groei.

Sy leun oor en streel liefdevol oor Bernhard se blonde koppie. *Asseblief, Here, hou hom gesond. Maak hom sterk soos sy pappa*.

***

> *Liefste Marta*
> *Ek dank God dat jy die Atlantiese Oseaan nie in hierdie tyd moes oorsteek nie. Destyds was 'n ysberg 'n mens se grootste bekommernis, maar nou is die gevare mensgemaak en skuil hulle onder die oppervlak. Pappa het vanoggend vir ons gelees dat die Lusitania net langs die Ierse kus deur 'n Duitse duikboot gesink is. Meer as 1 100 passasiers het saam met die skip in die water verdwyn. 'n Paar honderd van hulle was Amerikaanse burgers, en Pappa glo dat Amerika nou ook tot die oorlog gaan toetree.*
>
> *Die oorlog word net groter sonder enige einde in sig. Die mans sterf by die duisende in die loopgrawe. Arik, Hermann en my broers is almal in aktiewe diens. Daar is stories dat ons manne die paaie sal opblaas as hulle moet.*
>
> *Die hele land wag in spanning. Ek bid dat ons leiers ons uit die stryd kan hou.*

Marta bid voortdurend vir Rosie en Arik. Sy bid vir haar broer, Hermann. Sy bid dat Switserland nie by die oorlog betrek sal word nie.

***

Die henne lê nou meer eiers as wat die gesin kan eet. Marta gaan haal net dit wat hulle nodig het en laat die henne die res uitbroei. Kort voor lank het sy 'n dosyn hoenders en twee hane wat om dominansie baklei. Sy het mooi gekyk wat Niclas destyds gedoen het, en nou bou sy 'n tweede hok vir die ander haan en helfte van die henne. Sy maal genoeg graan vir voer.

Onder Marta se wakende oog het die koei se gesondheid ook verbeter. Toe Liam Helgerson een Sondag by hulle kom eet, vra sy of sy die koei saam met een van sy beste bulle kan laat loop. “Jy kan die kalfie kry wanneer hy gespeen is of ’n gedeelte van die kaas wat ek hopelik gaan maak.”

“Ek sal die kaas vat. Jy het ’n heel innoverende vrou, Waltert.”

“Sy het haar eie losieshuis gehad toe ek haar in Montreal ontmoet het.”

“Nou wat het julle hier op die vlaktes kom maak?”

Marta gee ’n kort laggie. “Ek het hom dieselfde gevra.” Toe Niclas se gesig verstrak, verander sy die onderwerp. “Jy kan anders besluit oor die kalf, meneer Helgerson. Die feit dat ek Switsers is, beteken nie ek weet hoe om kaas te maak nie.”

Hy lag. “Dalk nie, maar ek het geen twyfel dat jy sal leer nie.”

Niclas ploeg en saai winterkoring. Terwyl hy vir die oes wag, huur hy sy dienste uit en maak putte skoon. Soms bly hy dae lank weg. Marta probeer aan die stilte en eensaamheid van die prêrie gewoond raak, maar dit knaag aan haar senuwees.

“Helgerson sê daar is ’n steenkoolmyn so tien kilometer van hier af,” sê Niclas een aand. “Ek sal uitgrawe wat ons kan gebruik en die res in Brandon gaan verkoop.” Hy kom stoor die steenkool in die kelder. Marta maak die steenkool met ’n dekseil toe om te keer dat die swart stof deur die vloerplanke opwalm.

Toe dit kouer word, skuif Niclas die hoenderhokke na die skuur en stapel hooibale rondom drie kante om hulle warm te hou. Dan kom die sneeu, en vir Marta is dit asof sy haar in ’n bevrore woesteny bevind.

Niclas en meneer Helgerson neem hulle byle en gaan kap gate in die bevrore rivier sodat die perde en beeste kan drink. Met sy tuiskoms is Niclas so styf van die koue dat sy hom moet help om by die deur in te kom. Marta dokter hom die res van die aand, bang dat hy sy ore, vingers en tone gaan verloor.

“Sodra die sneeu smelt, gaan ons Montreal toe!”

“Nee, ons kan nie. Ek het ’n vierjaar-kontrak geteken.”

Vier jaar? Sy huil. “Ek haat hierdie plek! Wat gebeur as die gate wat julle in die ys gekap het, vol sneeu en ys word? Sê nou jy verdwaal in ’n sneeustorm en kom nie weer huis toe nie? Sê nou – ?”

“Ek makeer niks nie.” Niclas neem Marta se kop tussen sy verbinde hande en soen haar hard. “Moenie ons seuntjie bang maak nie.”

Bernhard sit regop in sy bedjie en huil.

Sy plaas haar hande oor syne. “En wat gaan ons seuntjie sonder sy pa doen?” Sy staan op om Bernhard te gaan optel.

Niclas wikkel sy vingers vir hulle. “Sien? Ek is besig om mooi te ontdooi.” Toe sy hom aangluur, sug hy net. “Ek sal hom vat.” Bernhard huil nooit lank in sy pa se arms nie.

Marta gooi nog ’n paar prêriebolle in die houtstoof terwyl Niclas met hulle seuntjie speel. “Dis onmoontlik om hierdie huis warm te kry!” Sy los die stoofdeur oop en rol ’n paar matte op waarmee sy die spasie onder die deur toestop. “As ons nog drie jaar in hierdie godverlate plek bly, sal ons die rivier moet opdam sodat jy nie elke keer jou lewe hoef te waag om gate in die rivier te gaan kap nie.”

Kort nadat hulle met hierdie projek begin het, kom een van die bure suid van hulle op sy perd aangery. Niclas het saam met Helgerson gaan jag en Marta is besig om die gate tussen die groter klippe wat hy gestapel het, toe te pak. Toe sy die ruiter sien aankom, loop Marta uit en maak haar rok los waar sy dit bo haar knieë vasgeknoop het. Sy tel Bernhard op haar heup en wag die man in. “So dis hoekom die water so laag is. Wie het vir jou gesê jy mag dit doen? Jy kan nie sommer besluit om ’n dam in die rivier te bou nie. Die Verenigde State besit die waterregte.”

“Niemand het dit vir my gesê nie.”

“Wel, nou weet jy.” Hy swaai sy perd om en ry in die rigting waaruit hy gekom het.

Marta sit Bernhard neer en plant haar hande op haar heupe terwyl sy hom agternakyk. Dan hervat sy haar klippakkery. Toe Niclas laatmiddag terugkom, sê sy vir hom wat gebeur het. Hy vryf oor die agterkant van sy nek.

“Nou ja, as dit die wet is, moet ons dit respekteer.”

“As dit die wet is, is dit onregverdig! Die stroom loop deur hierdie grond, Kanadese grond! Ons diere het die water nodig. Hoekom moet jy drie kilometer ver loop om ’n gat in die ys te kap as ons ’n dam ’n kilometer van die huis af kan bou?”

“Ek sal gaan hoor wat Helgerson daarvan sê.”

Meneer Helgerson kom help hom om die dam af te breek. “Ek’s jammer, mevrou Waltert,” steun hy terwyl hy die groot klippe oewer toe dra.

“Nie halfpad so jammer soos wat Niclas gaan wees teen die tyd dat hy vir ons ’n put gegrawe het nie!” Dan raap sy Bernhard op en loop huis toe.

* * *

Toe alles begin smelt, neem Niclas sy gesin Brandon toe om voorraad te gaan koop. Marta bring van haar botter, eiers en hoenders saam om te verkoop en kibbel met die eienaar van die algemene handelaar terwyl Niclas genoeg hout gaan koop om ’n stoep te bou.

Robert Madson kom besoek hulle na die tweede oes. Marta het ’n onmiddellike en intense renons in die man met sy bultende maag en deftige nuwe motor. “Dis ’n plesier om u te ontmoet, mevrou Waltert. Ek sien u verwag nog ’n baba.” Hy buk en knyp Bernhard se wang. “Wat ’n oulike mannetjie.”

Toe Marta middagete bedien, merk sy dat Madson nie skroom om die skottel eerste te neem en, sonder inagneming van die ander eters, die beste hoenderporsie vir homself te kies nie. Toe die mans op die nuwe stoep gaan sit wat Niclas gebou het, hoor sy Madson sê dat die pryse hierdie jaar swak is en dat hy nie soveel wins gemaak het as wat hy gehoop het nie. Toe sy in die deur kom staan, gee Niclas haar een kyk en stel voor dat hy en Madson ’n entjie gaan stap om na die verbeterings te gaan kyk wat hy en Marta aangebring het.

Marta is woedend. Sy los die skottelgoed en dra ’n stoel buitentoe. Sy laat Bernhard op die grond speel terwyl sy na die twee mans kyk. Hulle loop nie ver nie, maar staan voor die skuur en praat. Niclas loop na die land toe en Madson kom terug huis toe. Marta sien die hang in Niclas se skouers. Sy staan op toe Madson aankom. “Is u so gou op pad?” Sy probeer nie die ysigheid uit haar stem hou nie.

“Ek sal iemand stuur om die koei te kom haal.”

“U sal nie.”

Hy lyk verras. “Dis my koei.”

“Daardie koei is deel van ons kontrak, meneer Madson.” Sy het genoeg gesien om te weet dat die man niks vir sy werknemers voel nie, minste van alles of hulle genoeg het om te eet. “Ons moet melk hê vir ons kinders.” Sy plaas haar hand op haar geswolle maag om haar punt te benadruk.

“Ek sal vir julle ’n ander koei gee.”

“Dit het my maande geneem om daardie koei gesond te kry. Ons seun gaan nie sonder melk wees terwyl ek nog een van jou siek koeie versorg nie.” Sy wys met haar vinger na die veld. “Daardie koei bly net waar sy is.”

Sy gesig word rooi. “Dan vat ek die kalf.”

“Net as u sy pa is.”

Sy oë verdonker. "U is 'n harde vrou, mevrou Waltert."

Sy kyk hom onverskrokke in die oë. Hy herinner haar aan Herr Keller. "Hard, ja, maar nie hardvogtig soos u nie." Niclas sal sy woord teenoor hierdie man hou, maar hulle sal nog sien of Madson sy woord teenoor Niclas sal hou. Sy twyfel.

Hy kyk weg en sy sien hoe hy om hom rondkyk. Toe hy die hoenderhokke sien wat Niclas weer buitentoe geskuif het, glinster sy oë. "As ek nie die kalf kan kry nie, wil ek die hoenders hê."

"Natuurlik. U kan u haan en vier henne kry. Dit is wat aan u behoort. En ek sal hulle sommer nou dadelik vir u gaan haal." Sy klim van die stoep af en loop in die rigting van die kleiner hok. Dan steek sy vas en kyk na hom. "Soek u hulle dood en gepluk, of lewendig en geveerd?" Sy kyk betekenisvol na sy nuwe motor. "Hulle kan nogal morsig wees."

"Sit hulle in 'n krat."

"Het u een agter in u motor?"

"Los dit net!" Nadat hy die stof van sy hoed afgeskud het, loop hy na sy stowwerige swart motor toe. "Ons sal dit aan die einde van die kontrak regmaak."

Sy staan, vuiste in die sye. "Ek weet hoeveel koring kos. Ek het in Brandon rondgevra. U moenie dink ek's onder 'n kalkoen uitgebroei nie!"

"Jou man het 'n kontrak geteken!" Hy skuif swaar agter die stuur in en slaan die deur toe. "Alles op hierdie plek behoort aan my!"

"Ons is nie slawe nie. En werkers verdien hulle loon! Die Here weet wat u doen, meneer Madson! En God sal tussen jou en my man beslis!"

Die stof maak wolke soos hy wegtrek.

Marta bly kwaad en toe Niclas inkom vir aandete, ontlaai sy haar opgekropte woede op hom. "Ek sê jou nou, Niclas." Sy haal nog 'n gebraaide hoender uit die oond. "Daardie man gaan jou nie 'n sent betaal wanneer die kontrak verby is nie. Ons moet ons goed pak en ry."

Niclas se stem is sag. "Ek het my woord gegee."

"Wat van sý woord?"

"Dis mý woord wat saak maak. My ja is my ja." Hy lyk so moeg. "Die hoender ruik lekker."

Marta kloof die gebraaide voël middeldeur en plaas dit op die skottel. "Gaan koop asseblief nog 'n geweer as jy weer ingaan dorp toe, Niclas."

Hy kyk geskok na haar. "Jy is tog nie van plan om die man te skiet

nie?"

"Dit sal my die grootste vreugde verskaf!" Sy sit die skottel op die tafel neer en gaan sit op haar stoel. "Die groentetuin is besig om onder die hase deur te loop en ek het gister 'n wildsbok gesien. Ek dink hulle weet wanneer jy gaan jag en dan kom hulle hiernatoe vir versnaperings. As ek weer moet hoender eet, groei ek vere. As jy vir my 'n geweer bring, kan ek vir jou wildsvleis en haaspastei voorsit."

***

*Liefste Rosie*

*Dit wat ek gevrees het, is besig om te gebeur. Niclas word deur Madson ingedoen, en ek gaan ons tweede kind in die middel van die winter hê, 40 kilometer van die naaste dorp en vroedvrou af.*

*Niclas het die vorige keer sonder my dorp toe gegaan. Hierdie baba lê nie so goed soos Bernhard nie, en ek wou nie enige kanse waag deur so ver op 'n ongelyke pad te ry nie. Niclas het drie kratte hoenders, botter en eiers gehad om te verkoop, maar het met 'n leë beursie teruggekom. Meneer Ingersol het vir hom krediet by die algemene handelaar gegee. Soos ek vir Niclas sê, krediet is goed, maar kontant is beter.*

*Ek het nog nooit iemand so hard sien werk nie. Maar aan die einde van die kontrak met hierdie skurk van 'n Madson gaan hy niks hê om daarvoor te wys nie, behalwe spiere en eelte.*

## Chapter 14

**1917**

Niclas and Mr. Helgerson had gone out to look for some missing cattle the day Marta went into labor. When her water broke, she started to cry, which frightened poor Bernhard. She calmed herself with an effort and reassured him Mama was fine, just fine. Then she tried to remember what preparations she needed to make.

She stoked the stove with prairie chips. She spilled blocks on the floor to distract Bernhard. Thankfully, he grabbed them and banged them together happily while she paced, rubbing at her aching belly.

The contractions came fast and hard. Sweat beaded her forehead. As the pain bore down heavily, she sat and closed her eyes. *Oh, God, oh, God, bring my husband home soon. This baby is not going to take all day and half the night like Bernhard did.*

Bernhard didn't want to play anymore. Pushing himself up, he toddled over to her. "Mama, Mama," he said over and over again, holding his arms up. He wanted her to hold him.

"Not now. Mama is busy." He clutched at her, trying to climb up, but she had no lap on which to hold him. Her swollen abdomen became as hard as a rock. She groaned and Bernhard cried. When the pain eased, Marta pulled herself up and tried to lift him, but another contraction had already begun. When she set him on the floor again, Bernhard screamed.

Taking him by the hand, she pulled him along to his crib. As the pain eased slightly, she lifted him. "Go to sleep. Mama's all right. You'll have a little brother or sister soon. . . ."

Rubbing her back, she went to the window and looked out, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Papa will be home soon. Take your nap, Bernhard." Wiping tears away, she leaned heavily against the sill, counting the seconds through another contraction. It lasted longer this time.

Still no sign of Niclas.

"Oh, God." She moaned, wanting to bend her knees and lower herself to the floor. "Help me. Jesus, help me. . . ."

Marta spread a blanket over the rug. She went outside and scooped snow into a pot and put it on the stove to melt. The contractions were coming closer together and lasting longer. She cut twine and dropped it into the steaming water. Yanking a drawer open, she took out her paring knife and dropped that in as well. Trembling

violently, she waited a moment before fishing the twine and knife out of the hot water. She had no more time to wait.

Thankfully, Bernhard had cried himself to sleep.

The urge came to push. She rolled a clean rag and bit down on it, muffling the groan. Lowering herself to her knees, she faced the warmth of the stove and hitched up her skirt, cutting away the flour-sack undergarment she had made.

One contraction rolled into another. She bit on the cloth to stifle her moans. Perspiration dripped from her face. Her flesh tore as the head came. Marta bore down again and the baby slipped from her body into her hands. Shaking violently, Marta sat back on her heels.

The baby didn't cry. Wrapped in its white and red womb's coat, the infant lay curled on its side, the umbilical cord still linked with Marta.

"Breathe." Marta leaned forward, gritting her teeth against the pain. She took one of the diapers she had laid out and wiped the infant's face and body. A little girl. "Breathe!"

She turned the baby over and gave the tiny bottom a gentle slap. "Oh, Jesus, give her breath. Please. Please!" She rubbed gently, praying over and over. A soft, mewling cry came, and Marta sobbed in thanksgiving. Another contraction came and her body expelled the placenta.

The door opened, filling the small cabin with a blast of cold winter air. She heard Niclas cry out her name. He closed the door quickly, stripped off his coat, and came to her. "Marta. Oh, *mein Liebling*! What can I do for you?"

"She's hardly breathing." Marta sobbed harder. "Bring the hot water in that pan. And snow! Quickly, Niclas." She mixed the scalding with the cold and tested the temperature. Then she carefully lowered her daughter into the pan, supporting the baby with one hand while washing her gently with the other. The infant's arms and legs jerked, and her tiny mouth opened and wobbled in a weak cry.

Bernhard had been large and chubby, his skin pink. He had screamed so loudly, his face turned beet red. This little girl had spindly little legs and a thatch of dark hair. Her tiny body quivered as from cold. Heart breaking, Marta dried her tenderly and swaddled her in a cloth Niclas had warmed by the fire. "I need a fresh pan of hot water and salt." She felt the blood running down her legs and remembered the midwife's warning about infection.

Niclas quickly did her bidding. "What can I do?"

"Take her. Hold her close against you, inside your shirt. Keep her warm or she'll die."

"But what about you?"

"I can take care of myself!"

Though the pain was excruciating, Marta completed all she knew she must. "I need your hand." Niclas helped her to her feet while holding the baby. She sank onto the bed. "Give her to me now." Lying on her side, she tucked the baby close.

It took several minutes of trying before the little one finally latched on to her breast.

Bernhard awakened and saw Niclas. "Papa! Papa!" He held out his arms.

Marta felt the prickle of tears. "He'll be hungry."

"I shouldn't have left you." Niclas cut a piece of the bread Marta had made that morning and gave it to their son. "I should've been here."

"We didn't know she'd come two weeks early."

"She's so small. She looks like her mother."

Marta gazed at the tiny girl lying so still and quiet, her little fist clenched against Marta's white flesh. She felt a sudden overwhelming love for this child, a bond so tight, she felt her heart ripping open. *Oh, Mama, is this what you felt when you held Elise for the first time?*

"We should name her now."

She heard what lay behind Niclas's quiet, broken words. He didn't think their daughter would live long. *Please, God, don't take her from me! She's so tiny and weak, so helpless. Give her a chance, Lord.*

Brushing her finger lightly against the silky pale cheek, Marta watched the tiny mouth work again, tugging lightly at her breast for sustenance. "Your mother's name was Ada."

"Yes, but let's not give her that name. What about Elise?" When Marta glanced up sharply, he frowned. "What's wrong?"

She had never told Niclas about her sister. "Nothing. It's just not a name I will ever give any daughter of mine." When he searched her face, she lowered her head and closed her eyes. She felt his hand rest gently on her head.

"You decide."

"Her name will be Hildemara Rose."

"It's a strong name for such a frail baby."

"Yes, but God willing, she'll grow into it."

* * *

While Marta healed, Niclas went into town, taking Bernhard with him. He came back with supplies and a long-awaited letter from Rosie.

*Dear Marta,*

*Even if you are out in the middle of nowhere, you are fortunate to be in Canada, far away from this war that never seems to end. It must be strange to have only one neighbor closer than five miles. Liam Helgerson sounds like an admirable man.*

*The news we receive is never good. Germany is bleeding France dry. Two hundred thousand Frenchmen died at Somme, and half a million German boys with them.*

*London is being bombed by Germany's new aeroplanes. Your brother remains on guard with his unit on the French border. Your father was recalled to duty along with my father and the other men in our town. Only young boys and old men are left in Steffisburg. No one has crossed our borders, thanks be to God.*

*Herr Madson sounds like a despicable sort of man, but I admire Niclas more and more. How many men keep their word no matter the provocation to break it? You can count on a man like that to love and cherish you in sickness and in health for as long as you both live.*

Marta wrote back, but had to wait a month before Niclas took her to Brandon and she could post it.

*My dear friend,*

*I am delivered of a baby daughter I have named Hildemara. Her middle name is Rose after you. She is very small and delicate. She barely cried when she was born, and she doesn't cry much now. Bernhard was big and robust from the beginning.*

*I fear for this little one. I understand now how Mama's heart broke every time she held Elise. She was small and frail, too. Bernhard put on weight right away, but this little one isn't much bigger than she was a month ago. Bernhard screams for what he wants. My little Hildemara is content to sleep warm at my breast.*

*Bernhard is fascinated by his little sister. We let him hold her in his lap while Niclas reads from the Bible.*

*Pray for your namesake, Rosie. One breath from heaven could blow her away, but God forbid I go too far in protecting her and bring her up to be weak like Elise.*

* * *

**1918**

When Niclas's time under contract came to an end, Madson returned.

Marta saw the car approaching and went out onto the porch, Hildemara riding on her hip. Niclas, covered with dust, came in from the field to welcome Madson in his tailored suit and hat. He tipped his hat to Marta. She gave a cool nod and went back inside the house, keeping watch through the window. She had no intention of inviting the man to dinner.

Madson didn't stay long. After he climbed into his car and drove away, Niclas stood with his hands shoved in his overall pockets, shoulders stooped. Rather than come to the house, he went out to the field and stood staring off into the distance. Marta knew the reason for his despair and struggled between anger and pity.

When Niclas finally came inside, she placed his dinner in front of him.

Sighing heavily, he put his elbows on the table and covered his face. "Four years of hard work, all for nothing." He wept. "I'm sorry, Marta."

She put her hand on his shoulder and pressed her lips together, saying nothing. "We all learn hard lessons in this life."

"He wants me to sign on for another four years. He said things are getting better. . . ."

The hair rose on the back of Marta's neck. She lifted her hands and stepped back. "You didn't sign anything, did you?"

"I said I'd think about it."

"Think about it? You know the man is a cheat and a liar!" Bernhard looked between them. Hildemara started to cry.

"I won't sign." Niclas lifted Hildemara from her high chair.

"It's good you didn't tell him that. He'd have put our two cows on leads and carted away all our chickens!"

Niclas sat again, bouncing Hildemara on his lap and trying to soothe her. He raised bleak eyes to Marta. "Quiet down. You're scaring her."

"She's not half as scared as I am you'll keep us here another four years!"

"I've got to figure out what we're going to do."

She put her hands on her hips. "We'll sell what belongs to us and go back to Montreal. That's what we'll do!"

He raised his head, eyes darkening. "We're not going back to Montreal. That much I do know! There's no work for me there. And I'm not living off my wife!"

"Winnipeg, then. It's another railroad hub. There'll be work for

you there. I'll wire Carleen and offer her the boardinghouse for a fair price. If she can't buy it, I'll put it on the market. As soon as I get the money, I'll buy another boardinghouse."

"No, you won't! You can't run a boardinghouse with two children and another baby on the way."

"Watch me!"

He stood and thrust Hildemara into her arms. "You'll take care of our children and whatever house we find to rent. That's what you'll do! I'll get a job. I'll support my family!"

Marta turned away, afraid she'd remind him he'd done a lousy job so far. "How long before Madson wants an answer?"

Niclas let out his breath. "He said he'd be back in ten days."

"That gives us ten days to build enough crates for two hundred chickens. We'll take the cow and calf to Mr. Helgerson. He'll pay a fair price and add our calf to his herd and have one of his men take care of the cow until Madson comes back."

"I don't think Mr. Ingersoll will take two hundred chickens."

"I don't plan to sell them in Brandon. We'll load the wagon and take them to Winnipeg. We'll get a better price in city markets."

"We can't take the wagon, Marta. It doesn't belong to us. Neither do the horses."

"We're not stealing them, Niclas. We're borrowing them. Or do you expect us to walk back to Winnipeg, dragging our trunks behind us? Once we're there, we'll send word to Mr. Madson and he can send one of his other serfs to fetch them."

Marta thanked God she had gone to Brandon with Niclas the last time. Knowing the contract was coming to a close, she had told Mr. Ingersoll he needed to settle the account with her. He hadn't been happy about it, but she had cash enough to pay rent and buy what they would need to set up housekeeping in Winnipeg.

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*Niclas found work at the locomotive works. His old supervisor, Rob MacPherson, transferred to Winnipeg. When he saw Niclas had applied, he hired him. And just in time. Our third child, Clotilde Anna, arrived a month after Niclas went back to work. She is as robust as Bernhard, and every bit as loud in her demands. Think of it, Rosie—two miracles in the very same month! We have finally seen an end to this awful war, and we have been blessed with little Clotilde.*

*Hildemara Rose has none of the sibling jealousy you talk about*

*with your children. She adores her brother and sister, so much so she will give up anything if one of the others wants it, whether it's a toy or food off her plate. They take advantage and she lets them. I will have to teach her otherwise.*

*Carleen and Nally Kildare bought my boardinghouse in Montreal. They couldn't afford the full price, but they managed to get a loan from the Bank of Montreal. I don't intend to touch the money unless Niclas loses his job again. God forbid that happens! I mentioned buying this house once, but he was adamant we should wait and see how things go. As far as I can see, things are going very well.*

Rumors abounded as soldiers returned home from Europe. The locomotive works let some foreign workers go in order to rehire those who had served overseas. When she asked, Niclas said his job was secure as long as MacPherson was supervisor. Other than that, Niclas didn't talk about much of anything. He came home from work each day and sat in the parlor, head back, eyes closed. He roused enough to play with Bernhard and Clotilde. Hildemara always stood back, waiting her turn.

After dinner, Niclas read Bible stories to the children before Marta settled them in bed. Then he would fall silent again, sitting in his chair, gazing out the window. He always seemed worn down when he came home from work. She wondered how he could be so tired all the time when he no longer had to get up before dawn and work until dusk. Surely working at a drafting desk was preferable to the backbreaking work of plowing forty acres.

Marta waited until they were alone in bed, the lamp extinguished, before she asked. "Will you stay angry with me forever, Niclas?"

He turned to her in the darkness. "Why would I be angry?"

"Because I insisted you work for the railroad." She knew he had loved working the land. He loved seeing the wheat and barley grow. He had felt such pride in the crops he brought in. Would he become like Papa, blaming her for making him give up an impossible dream and eventually taking out his discontent on her and their children?

"I took the work available."

"But you're miserable." Her voice broke.

He drew her into his arms. "A husband tries his best to make his wife happy."

When he kissed her, she wanted to weep. She had seen little joy

in him since they had moved to Winnipeg, and guilt tore at her. What if he tired of her? What if he began to see her as Papa always had: a homely, ill-tempered, selfish, and worthless girl? "How can a wife be happy when her husband is miserable?"

"You hated the wheat farm, and I hate my job." He tilted her chin and cupped her cheek. "I promise I won't take you back there, but I don't know how long I can bear to stay here."

"You'll leave me someday."

"Never."

"Do you promise?"

He rolled her onto her back. "I promise." She remembered what Rosie had said about him and drew his head down.

A long time later, she lay facing him again. She combed her fingers through his hair. "What are we going to do?"

"Wait." He took her hand and kissed it. "God will show us a way."

Niclas's hours were cut the next day.

* * *

Marta knew something had happened when Niclas came in the door. He didn't look tired this afternoon. His eyes glowed. "MacPherson is leaving."

Her heart sank. "Is he going back to Montreal?"

"He's going to California. He has a job lined up in Sacramento." He hung up his coat and hat. "He told me my hours are being cut again." Bernhard and Clotilde clamored for attention.

Marta shushed them and sent them in the parlor to play. Hildemara stood in the doorway, watching them with wide hazel eyes. "Go with Bernhard and Clotilde, Hildemara. Go on!"

"How can they cut your hours again?" He only made seventy-five dollars a month, barely enough to keep a roof over their heads and good food on the table.

"It could get worse."

She knew that meant he might lose his job after all. "I'll start looking for property. We can open another boardinghouse. We could manage it together."

"Railroad men are leaving. The company is giving away free tickets to California."

*California?* She tried to absorb the shock. "What would you do in California?"

"MacPherson said he will do what he can to help me find a job. If

not, there's good land in California."

"You can't mean you want to go back to farming!"

"I miss the plowing and planting. I miss harvesting crops I've sown with my own hands. I miss wide-open spaces and fresh air."

She tried to remain calm. "I remember frigid winters. I remember thunderstorms and flashes of lightning that filled us both with fear because one strike could burn away a year's work in minutes!"

"The weather is temperate in California. There's no ice and snow in the Central Valley."

She started to shake. "Please tell me you didn't sign another contract."

"No, but I applied for tickets. It'll be a miracle if we get them. They're going to men who have worked for the company five years or more. But I had to try. There won't be any more in a week."

Even having been warned of what might come, Marta wasn't prepared when Niclas came home with train tickets to California. "This is the answer to my prayers," he told her, holding them up in his hand. She hadn't seen that look on his face since they left the wheat fields.

Marta remembered how much they had at the end of four years of farming. Nothing! She knew he wouldn't listen to that reasoning, and she searched for excuses to delay. "We could wait until after Christmas, at least."

He laughed. "We'll spend Christmas in California!"

Bursting into tears, she fled into the kitchen. She thought Niclas would follow, but he didn't. As she set the table, she heard him telling the children about California, the golden land of opportunity, the place where the sun was always shining. Even after she called everyone to dinner, he kept on about it. She picked at her food and tried not to glare at him and upset the children. Hildemara kept looking at her. "Eat!" she told her. Clotilde already looked like the older sister with her greater height and weight.

"When are we going, Papa?" Bernhard sounded like he'd been invited to a world's fair.

"The end of the week. We'll take only what we need." His eyes met Marta's. "We'll sell the furniture and buy what we need when we get to California."

"All of it?" she said faintly. "What about the new bedroom set we bought last year, and the couch, and—?"

"It would cost more to have them sent by freight than buying

new when we get there."

She lost her appetite completely. Niclas took seconds. "They say you can pick oranges off the trees all year long."

Bernhard's eyes grew big. He'd had his first orange for Christmas last year. "As many as we want?"

"If we end up with an orange tree on our property."

"What property?" Marta said, steaming.

Niclas ruffled Bernhard's hair. "We don't have property, yet, *Sohn*. We'll have to spend time looking around first."

Marta cleared and washed the dishes while Niclas took the children into the parlor to read Bible stories.

"Off to bed." Marta shooed them up the stairs and got them ready for bed. Niclas came up and kissed them each good night. When he headed for their bedroom, she headed for the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not tired yet." Her heart pounded fiercely.

He followed her downstairs and into the parlor. She wrapped her arms around herself and refused to look at him. She could feel him standing behind her, looking at her. She heard him sigh heavily.

"Talk to me, Marta."

"What is there to talk about? You've already made up your mind."

"What better gift can we give our children than the chance of a better life? Isn't that what you've always wanted? Isn't that why you left home as young as you did?"

"I left because I wanted to make my own choices!"

He put his hands at her waist. "You chose me."

*For better or for worse, whether rich or poor . . .*

Niclas drew her back against him. The feelings he stirred with a touch always defeated her. She wanted to resist, but found herself surrendering to him again. When she leaned into him, he turned her around and embraced her. When he raised his mouth from hers, she leaned her head against his chest. His heart beat hard and fast.

"Trust me."

Marta closed her eyes and said nothing.

"If you can't trust me, trust God. He opened the way."

Marta wished she could believe it.

# Hoofstuk 14

## 1917

Niclas en Helgerson het na ’n paar verdwaalde beeste gaan soek toe Marta in kraam gaan. Toe haar water breek, begin sy huil, en arme Bernhard skrik. Nadat sy haar selfbeheersing herwin het, probeer sy hom troos en sê vir hom dat alles reg is. Dan probeer sy onthou wat sy alles moet doen.

Nadat sy die vuur met prêriebolle gestook het, gooi sy ’n paar speelblokkies op die vloer neer om Bernhard besig te hou. Genadiglik gryp hy hulle en kap hulle doodgelukkig teen mekaar terwyl sy op en af loop.

Die kontraksies kom vinnig en met groeiende intensiteit en die sweet pêrel oor haar voorkop. Toe die pyn haar wil oorweldig, gaan sy sit en sluit haar oë. *O, Here, o, Here, bring my man asseblief huis toe. Hierdie baba gaan nie ’n dag en ’n half neem soos Bernhard nie*.

Bernhard wil nie meer speel nie. Hy trek homself op en waggel na haar toe. “Mamma, Mamma,” sê hy oor en oor en steek sy armpies uit. Hy wil hê sy moet hom vashou.

“Nie nou nie. Mamma is besig.” Hy probeer op haar skoot klim, maar daar is nêrens plek vir hom om vas te hou nie. Haar geswolle buik is nou kliphard. Sy kreun en Bernhard huil. Toe die pyn effens bedaar, trek Marta haarself op en probeer hom optel, maar ’n volgende kontraksie het reeds begin. Toe sy hom weer op die vloer neersit, begin Bernhard skree.

Sy neem hom aan die hand en trek hom na sy bedjie toe. Toe daar ’n effense verligting kom, tel sy hom in sy bed. “Slapies, nou. Mamma is hier. Jou boetie of sussie is amper hier ... ”

Sy vryf oor haar rug en die trane stroom oor haar wange toe sy deur die venster kyk. “Pappa gaan nou-nou by die huis wees. Slapies ’n bietjie, Bernhard.” Sy vee haar trane af en leun teen die vensterbank terwyl sy tel hoe lank die volgende kontraksie duur. Dit neem langer

as die vorige een.

Daar is steeds geen teken van Niclas nie.

“O, Here.” Sy kreun. “Help my. Jesus, help my ... ”

Marta gooi ’n kombers oor die mat. Sy gaan uit en skep sneeu in ’n pot en gaan sit dit op die stoof om te smelt. Die kontraksies kom al hoe vinniger en duur langer. Sy sny ’n stuk garing af en laat sak dit in die kokende water. Sy pluk ’n laai oop en laat val ’n skilmes in die water. Sy bewe nou onbedaarlik en nadat sy ’n oomblik uitgehou het, vis sy die garing en mes uit die warm water. Sy kan nie meer wag nie.

Genadiglik het Bernhard homself aan die slaap gehuil.

Dit voel of sy moet druk. Sy rol ’n skoon vadoek op en byt dit tussen haar tande vas om die kreun te smoor. Sy sak voor die warm stoof op haar knieë neer en trek haar rok op om haar onderklere los te sny.

Een kontraksie loop oor in die volgende. Sy byt op die lap om haar kreune te demp. Die sweet stroom oor haar gesig. Sy voel hoe sy skeur toe die koppie kom. Nadat Marta ’n laaste keer gedruk het, voel sy hoe die baba na buite in haar wagtende hande gly. Marta bewe rukkerig en sit terug op haar hakke.

Die baba maak nie ’n geluid nie. Sy lê in ’n bondeltjie opgekrul, die naelstring steeds aan Marta vas.

“Haal asem.” Marta byt op haar tande van die pyn toe sy vooroor leun. Sy neem een van die doeke wat sy uitgelê het en vee die babatjie se gesig en lyfie af. ’n Klein dogtertjie. “Haal asem!”

Sy draai die baba om en gee die klein boudjies ’n ligte klappie. “Ag, Jesus, gee vir haar asem. Asseblief. Asseblief!” Sy vryf saggies oor die lyfie terwyl sy oor en oor bid. Toe sy ’n sagte, klaende gekerm hoor, begin Marta dankbaar snik. Nog ’n kontraksie kom en haar liggaam raak ontslae van die plasenta.

Die deur gaan oop en vul die klein voorhuis met ’n vlaag koue lug. Sy hoor Niclas haar naam uitroep. Hy maak die deur vinnig toe, stroop sy jas af en haas hom na haar toe. “Marta. O, *mein Liebling!* Wat kan ek vir jou doen?”

“Sy haal skaars asem.” Marta snik harder. “Bring die warm water in daardie pan. En sneeu! Gou, Niclas.” Sy meng die skroeiende water met die koue en toets die temperatuur. Dan laat sak sy haar dogtertjie versigtig in die pan. Terwyl sy die baba met haar een hand ondersteun, was sy haar sagkens met die ander. Die pasgeborene se armpies en bene ruk, en haar klein mondjie gaan oop en bewe in ’n swak huilstemmetjie.

Bernhard was groot en mollig, sy velletjie pienk. Hy het so hard

geskree dat sy gesiggie bloedrooi geword het. Hierdie klein dogtertjie het maer klein beentjies en ’n bos donker hare. Haar klein lyfie bewe asof van die koue. Marta droog haar saggies af en draai haar toe in ’n doek wat Niclas voor die vuur warm gemaak het. “Ek het ’n nuwe pan warm water en sout nodig.” Sy voel die bloed teen haar bene afloop en onthou die vroedvrou se waarskuwing oor infeksie.

Niclas doen wat sy vra. “Wat kan ek doen?”

“Vat haar. Hou haar teen jou vas, onder jou hemp. Sy sal doodgaan as sy nie warm gehou word nie.”

“Maar wat van jou?”

“Ek sal regkom!”

Alhoewel die pyn ondraaglik is, doen Marta wat sy geleer het. “Help my gou.” Niclas help haar op terwyl hy die baba vashou. Sy sak op die bed neer. “Gee haar nou vir my.” Sy het op haar sy gaan lê en trek die baba teen haar vas.

Dit neem ’n hele paar minute se probeer voordat die kleinding uiteindelik aan haar bors begin drink.

Bernhard word wakker en sien vir Niclas. “Pappa! Pappa!” Hy steek sy arms uit.

Marta voel die branderigheid van trane. “Hy sal honger wees.”

“Ek moes jou nie gelos het nie.” Niclas sny die brood wat Marta die oggend gebak het en gee ’n stukkie vir hulle seuntjie. “Ek moes hier gewees het.”

“Ons het nie geweet dat sy twee weke vroeg sou kom nie.”

“Sy is so klein. Sy lyk soos haar ma.”

Marta kyk na die klein dogtertjie wat so stil lê, haar klein vuisie teen Marta se wit vel gebal. Sy voel ’n skielike oorweldigende liefde vir hierdie kind, ’n band so sterk dat dit voel asof haar hart oopskeur. “*Ag, Mamma, is dit wat Ma gevoel het toe Mamma Elise vir die eerste keer vasgehou het?”*

“Ons moet haar nou ’n naam gee.”

Sy hoor die boodskap agter Niclas se sagte, gebroke woorde. Hy dink nie hulle dogtertjie gaan lank lewe nie. *Asseblief, God, moet haar nie van my wegneem nie! Sy is so klein en swak, so hulpeloos. Gee haar ’n kans, Here*.

Sy streel liggies oor die syagtige bleek wangetjie en kyk hoe die klein mondjie weer begin werk. “Jou ma se naam was Ada.”

“Ja, maar ek dink nie dis die regte naam vir haar nie. Wat van Elise?” Toe Marta skerp opkyk, frons hy. “Wat is fout?”

Sy het Niclas nooit van haar suster vertel nie. “Niks nie. Dis net nie

’n naam wat ek ooit vir my dogtertjie sal gee nie.” Toe hy ondersoekend na haar kyk, laat sak sy haar kop en sluit haar oë. Hy plaas sy hand sag op haar kop.

“Besluit jy.”

“Haar naam sal Hildemara Rose wees.”

“Dis ’n sterk naam vir so ’n klein babatjie.”

“Ja, maar as die Here wil, sal sy dit ingroei.”

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Niclas neem Bernhard saam met hom toe hy ingaan dorp toe terwyl Marta herstel. Hy kom terug met voorraad en ’n langverwagte brief van Rosie.

*Liewe Marta*

*Selfs al is jy in die middel van nêrens, kan jy gelukkig wees dat jy in Kanada is, ver van hierdie oorlog wat nie wil einde kry nie. Dit moet vreemd wees om net een buurman nader as agt kilometer te hê. Liam Helgerson klink na ’n bewonderenswaardige man.*

*Die nuus wat by ons uitkom, is nooit goed nie. Duitsland is besig om Frankryk droog te bloei. Twee honderd duisend Franse het by Somme gesneuwel, en ’n halfmiljoen Duitse soldate saam met hulle.*

*Londen word deur Duitsland se nuwe vliegtuie gebombardeer. Jou broer is steeds op die Franse grens. Jou pa is saam met my pa en die res van die mans in die dorp opgeroep. Net die jong seuns en ou mans het in Steffisburg agtergebly. Dank God dat ons nog nie binnegeval is nie.*

*Herr Madson klink na ’n misbaksel van ’n man, maar ek bewonder Niclas al hoe meer. Hoeveel mans hou hulle woord, ongeag die versoeking om dit te verbreek? Jy kan op so ’n man reken om jou vir die res van sy lewe in voorspoed en teëspoed te koester en lief te hê.*

Marta skryf terug, maar moet ’n maand wag voordat sy saam met Niclas Brandon toe kan gaan en dit pos.

*My liewe vriendin*

*Ek het ’n babadogtertjie in die lewe gebring en haar Hildemara genoem. Haar tweede naam is Rose. Sy is baie klein en fyn. Sy het skaars gehuil toe sy gebore is, en sy huil nou nog nie baie nie. Bernhard was van die begin af groot en fris.*

*Ek vrees vir hierdie enetjie. Ek verstaan nou hoe Mamma se hart gebreek het wanneer sy Elise vasgehou het. Sy was ook klein en broos.*

*Bernhard het dadelik gewig opgetel, maar hierdie kleintjie is nie veel groter as 'n maand gelede nie. Bernhard het geskree as hy iets wou hê. My klein Hildemara is tevrede om knus teen my bors te slaap.*

*Bernhard is gefassineerd deur sy klein sussie. Ons laat hom haar op sy skoot vashou terwyl Niclas Bybel lees.*

*Bid vir jou naamgenoot, Rosie. Dit voel asof die ligste windjie haar kan wegwaai, maar die Here behoed my dat ek haar oorbeskerm en sy eendag so swak soos Elise gaan wees.*

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## 1918

Madson kom terug toe Niclas se kontrak verstryk het.

Marta sien die motor aankom en gaan staan op die stoep, Hildemara op haar heup. Niclas kom vol stof van die lande af terug om Madson in sy snyerspak en hoed te verwelkom. Hy raak aan sy hoed toe hy na Marta kyk. Sy knik kil en gaan weer in, maar kyk deur die venster. Sy is geensins van plan om die man vir ete te nooi nie.

Madson bly nie lank nie. Nadat hy in sy motor geklim en weggery het, staan Niclas met sy hande in sy oorpak se sakke, sy skouers krom. In plaas daarvan om huis toe te kom, loop hy die veld in en gaan staan om die verte in te staar. Marta weet wat die rede vir sy wanhoop is en worstel tussen woede en bejammering.

Toe Niclas uiteindelik inkom, sit sy sy kos voor hom neer.

Hy sug swaar toe hy sy elmboë op die tafel plant en sy gesig in sy hande druk. "Vier jaar se harde werk, alles verniet." Hy huil. "Ek's jammer, Marta."

Sy plaas haar hand op sy skouer en pers haar lippe opmekaar en sê eers niks nie. "Ons almal moet 'n paar harde lesse in hierdie lewe leer."

"Hy wil hê ek moet vir nog vier jaar teken. Hy sê dinge lyk beter ... "

Marta se nekhare rys. Sy lig haar hande op en staan terug. "Moet asseblief nie vir my sê jy het iets gesê nie."

"Ek het gesê ek sal daaroor dink."

"Daaroor dink? Jy weet die man is 'n bedrieër en 'n leuenaar!" Bernhard kyk van sy ma na sy pa. Hildemara begin huil.

"Ek sal nie teken nie." Niclas tel Hildemara uit haar eetstoeltjie.

"Dis goed dat jy nie vir hom gesê het nie. Hy sou ons twee koeie laat haal het en al ons hoenders weggery het!"

Niclas gaan sit weer. Hy wip Hildemara op sy skoot om haar te sus. Hy kyk met moeë oë na Marta. "Bedaar, my vrou. Jy maak haar bang."

"Sy's nie halfpad so bang soos ek dat jy ons nog vier jaar hier gaan hou nie!"

"Ek moet besluit wat ons gaan doen."

Sy sit haar hande op haar heupe. "Ons gaan ons besittings verkoop en teruggaan Montreal toe. Dis wat ons gaan doen!"

Hy lig sy kop en sy oë verdonker. "Ons gaan nie terug Montreal toe nie. Dis ten minste een ding wat ek weet. Daar is nie werk vir my nie. En ek gaan nie toelaat dat my vrou my onderhou nie!"

"Winnipeg, dan. Daar is nog 'n spoorwegontwikkeling. Jy sal daar werk kry. Ek sal vir Carleen 'n telegram stuur en die losieshuis teen 'n billike prys vir haar aanbied. As sy dit nie kan koop nie, sal ek dit op die mark sit. Sodra ek die geld kry, koop ek 'n ander losieshuis."

"Nee, jy sal nie! Jy kan nie 'n losieshuis bestuur met twee kinders en nog 'n baba op pad nie."

"Jy het my nog nie gesien nie!"

Hy staan op en stop Hildemara in haar arms. "Jy sal na ons kinders kyk en die huishouding behartig. Dis wat jy sal doen! Ek sal 'n werk kry. Ek sal my gesin onderhou!"

Marta draai weg, bang dat sy hom daarop sal wys dat hy tot dusver nie 'n baie groot sukses daarvan gemaak het nie. "Hoe lank het ons voordat Madson 'n antwoord wil hê?"

Niclas laat sy asem gaan. "Hy't gesê hy kom weer oor tien dae."

"Dit gee ons tien dae om genoeg kratte vir 200 hoenders te bou. Ons sal die koei en kalf na meneer Helgerson toe neem. Hy sal vir ons 'n goeie prys gee en ons kalf oorneem. Een van sy mans kan die koei versorg totdat Madson terugkom."

"Ek dink nie meneer Ingersol sal 200 hoenders neem nie."

"Ek is nie van plan om hulle in Brandon te verkoop nie. Ons sal die wa laai en hulle Winnipeg toe neem. Ons sal 'n beter prys op die stedelike markte kry."

"Ons kan nie die wa vat nie, Marta. Dit behoort nie aan ons nie. Ook nie die perde nie."

"Ons steel hulle nie, Niclas. Ons leen hulle. Of verwag jy van ons om al die pad Winnipeg toe te loop en ons trommels agter ons aan te sleep? As ons eers daar is, sal ons meneer Madson laat weet dat hy een

van sy ander slawe kan stuur om hulle te kom haal."

Marta dank die Here dat sy die vorige keer saam met Niclas na Brandon toe is. Omdat sy geweet het dat die kontrak amper verstreke was, het sy meneer Ingersol gesê dat hy alles wat hy hulle skuld, in kontant moes terugbetaal. Hy was nie gelukkig nie, maar nou het sy genoeg geld vir huur en huisraad wanneer hulle in Winnipeg is.

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> *Liewe Rosie*
> *Niclas het by die spoorwegmaatskappy werk gekry. Sy vorige baas, Rob MacPherson, is Winnipeg toe verplaas en toe hy sien dat Niclas aansoek gedoen het, het hy hom aangestel. Ons derde kind, Clotilde Anna, is 'n maand na Niclas se aanstelling gebore. Sy is net so fris soos Bernhard en ewe luidrugtig wanneer dit by haar behoeftes kom. Dink net, Rosie – twee wonderwerke in een maand! Daar het uiteindelik 'n einde aan hierdie verskriklike oorlog gekom en ons is met klein Clotilde geseën.*
>
> *Hildemara Rose toon niks van die jaloesie waarvan jy praat nie. Sy aanbid haar boetie en sussie, in so 'n mate dat sy enigiets sal opgee wat die ander twee wil hê, of dit 'n speelding of kos uit haar bord is. Hulle maak misbruik van haar en sy neem vir lief daarmee. Ek sal haar moet leer om dit nie toe te laat nie.*
>
> *Carleen en Nally Kildare het my losieshuis in Montreal gekoop. Hulle kon nie die volle prys bekostig nie, maar hulle het 'n lening by die bank gekry. Ek is nie van plan om aan daardie geld te raak tensy Niclas weer sy werk verloor nie. Die Here behoed dat dit gebeur! Ek het een maal voorgestel dat ons hierdie huis koop, maar hy skop vas dat ons moet wag en kyk hoe dit gaan. Sover ek kan sien, gaan dit baie goed.*

Daar is volop gerugte wat saam met die soldate uit Europa terugkom. Sommige van die uitlanders word deur die spoorwegmaatskappy afgedank sodat hulle dié kan aanstel wat oorsee gaan veg het. Toe sy vra, sê Niclas dat sy werk nie in gevaar is solank MacPherson sy hoof is nie. Andersins praat haar man nie veel nie. Hy kom elke dag huis toe en sit kop agteroor en met geslote oë in die sitkamer. Later kry hy homself sover om met Bernhard en Clotilde te speel. Hildemara staan altyd opsy en wag op haar beurt.

Ná ete lees Niclas vir die kinders Bybelstories voordat Marta hulle in die bed gaan sit. Dan gaan sit hy weer in sy stoel en staar swyend deur

die venster. Hy lyk altyd afgemat wanneer hy van die werk af kom. Waarom is hy gedurig so moeg as hy nie meer voor dagbreek moet opstaan en die hele dag in die son moet werk nie? Sy werk voor die tekenbord moet tog verkieslik wees bo die uitmergelende werk op die lande.

Marta wag totdat hulle alleen in die bed is en dit donker is voordat sy vra. “Gaan jy vir altyd vir my kwaad bly, Niclas?”

Hy draai na haar in die donker. “Hoekom sou ek kwaad wees?”

“Omdat ek aangehou het dat jy vir die spoorweg kom werk.” Sy weet hoe hy dit geniet het om te boer. Hy was lief daarvoor om te sien hoe die koring en gars groei. Hy was so trots op die oes wat hy ingesamel het. Gaan hy soos Pappa word en haar blameer omdat sy hom gedwing het om van ’n onmoontlike droom af te sien? Gaan hy sy ongedurigheid dan op haar en hulle kinders uithaal?

“Ek het die beskikbare werk geneem.”

“Maar jy is ongelukkig.” Haar stem breek.

Hy trek haar teen hom vas. “’n Man doen sy bes om sy vrou gelukkig te maak.”

Toe hy haar soen, wil sy huil. Hy lyk so ongelukkig sedert hulle Winnipeg toe gekom het, en die skuldgevoelens verteer haar. Sê nou hy word moeg vir haar? Sê nou hy begin haar sien soos Pappa haar gesien het: ’n vaal, humeurige, selfsugtige en nikswerd mens? “Hoe kan ’n vrou gelukkig wees wanneer haar man ongelukkig is?”

“Jy het dit op die plaas gehaat en ek haat my werk.” Hy lig haar ken en kelk sy hand om haar wang. “Ek belowe ek sal jou nie terugvat soontoe nie, maar ek weet nie hoe lank ek dit hier sal uithou nie.”

“Jy gaan my eendag verlaat.”

“Nooit nie.”

“Belowe jy?”

Hy draai haar op haar rug. “Ek belowe.” Sy onthou wat Rosie van hom gesê het en trek sy kop nader.

’n Lang ruk later lê sy na hom gedraai. Sy trek haar vingers deur sy hare. “Wat gaan ons doen?”

“Wag.” Hy neem haar hand en soen dit. “God sal vir ons die pad wys.”

Die volgende dag word Niclas se ure by die werk verminder.

***

Marta weet dat daar iets gebeur het toe Niclas by die deur inkom. Hy lyk nie moeg nie. Sy oë glinster. "MacPherson gaan weg."

Haar moed sak. "Gaan hy terug Montreal toe?"

"Hy gaan Kalifornië toe. Hy het 'n werk wat in Sacramento vir hom wag." Hy hang sy jas en hoed op. "Hy het vir my gesê dat my ure weer verminder word." Bernhard en Clotilde kom op hulle pa afgestorm.

Marta maak hulle stil en stuur hulle om in die sitkamer te gaan speel. Hildemara staan in die deur en kyk met groot, bruin oë na hulle. "Gaan saam met Bernhard en Clotilde, Hildemara. Toe nou!"

"Hoe kan hulle jou ure nog minder maak?" Hy maak net 75 dollar 'n maand, skaars genoeg om vir 'n dak oor hulle kop en kos op die tafel te sorg.

"Dit kan erger word."

Sy weet dit beteken dat hy uiteindelik tog sy werk sal verloor. "Ek sal na eiendom begin soek. Ons kan weer 'n losieshuis oopmaak. Ons kan dit saam bestuur."

"Die spoorwegwerkers is besig om weg te gaan. Die maatskappy verskaf gratis kaartjies na Kalifornië."

*Kalifornië*? Sy wag dat die skok insink. "Wat gaan jy in Kalifornië doen?"

"MacPherson sê hy sal sy bes probeer om vir my werk te kry. As dit nie uitwerk nie, is daar goeie grond in Kalifornië."

"Jy bedoel tog nie jy wil weer begin boer nie!"

"Ek wens ek kon weer ploeg en plant. Ek wens ek kon weer 'n oes insamel wat ek met my eie hande gesaai het. Ek mis die ooptes en vars lug."

Sy probeer kalm bly. "Ek onthou die ysige winters. Ek onthou donderstorms en donderslae wat ons senuwees aan flarde gehad het omdat een straal 'n jaar se werk in vyf minute kan verbrand!"

"Kalifornië het 'n gematigde klimaat. Daar is nie ys en sneeu in die vallei nie."

Sy begin bewe. "Sê asseblief vir my dat jy nie nog 'n kontrak geteken het nie."

"Nee, maar ek het kaartjies aangevra. Dit sal 'n wonderwerk wees as ons hulle kry. Hulle gaan eintlik vir mans wat vyf jaar of langer vir die maatskappy gewerk het. Maar ek moes probeer. Oor 'n week sal daar nie meer wees nie."

Al moes Marta dit te wagte gewees het, is sy nie voorbereid toe Niclas met die treinkaartjies huis toe kom nie. "Dit is

gebedsverhoring," sê hy vir haar en hou hulle op. Sy het daardie kyk in sy oë laas op die plaas gesien.

Marta onthou hoeveel hulle aan die einde van die vier jaar op die plaas gehad het. Niks nie! Sy weet dat sy hom nie daarmee sal oortuig nie en soek na verskonings om die trek uit te stel. "Ons kan ten minste tot na Kersfees wag."

Hy lag. "Ons sal Kersfees in Kalifornië vier!"

Sy bars uit in trane en vlug na die kombuis toe. Niclas volg haar nie soos wat sy gedink het nie. Toe sy later tafel dek, hoor sy hom met die kinders praat. Hy vertel hulle van Kalifornië, die goue land met sy geleenthede, die plek waar die son altyd skyn. Selfs toe hulle aan tafel sit, is hy nog nie uitgepraat nie. Sy peusel aan haar kos en probeer om nie vir hom te gluur en die kinders te ontstel nie. Hildemara sit en kyk na haar. "Eet!" beveel sy haar. Clotilde lyk soos die ouer suster met haar groter liggaamsbou.

"Wanneer gaan ons, Pappa?" Bernhard klink asof hy na 'n wêreldskou uitgenooi is.

"Aan die einde van die week. Ons vat net wat ons nodig het." Hy kyk na Marta. "Ons gaan die meubels verkoop en dit wat ons nodig het, koop wanneer ons in Kalifornië is."

"Alles?" vra sy floutjies. "Wat van die nuwe slaapkamerstel wat ons verlede jaar gekoop het en die bank, en – ?"

"Dit sal meer kos om hulle daar te kry as om nuwes te koop wanneer ons eers daar is."

Sy is nou glad nie meer honger nie. Niclas wag 'n paar sekondes. "Hulle sê 'n mens kan heeljaar lemoene pluk."

Bernhard se oë rek. Hy het sy eerste lemoen die vorige Kersfees gehad. "Soveel as wat ons wil hê?"

"Wanneer ons later 'n lemoenboom op ons eie grond het."

"Watter grond?" vra Marta stomend.

Niclas krap Bernhard se hare deurmekaar. "Ons het nog nie ons eie grond nie, *Sohn*. Ons sal eers 'n rukkie wag en rondkyk."

Marta dek af en was skottelgoed terwyl Niclas die kinders sitkamer toe neem om vir hulle Bybel te lees.

"Bed toe." Marta boender hulle die trappe op en maak hulle gereed vir die nag. Niclas kom boontoe om hulle nag te soen. Toe hy na hulle slaapkamer toe loop, mik sy na die trappe.

"Waarnatoe gaan jy?"

"Ek's nog nie moeg nie." Haar hart klop onstuimig.

Hy volg haar na die sitkamer toe. Sy slaan haar arms om haarself en

weier om na hom te kyk. Sy kan hom agter haar voel staan en na haar kyk. Hy sug swaar.

“Praat met my, Marta.”

“Wat is daar om te sê? Jy het reeds besluit.”

“Wat meer kan ons vir ons kinders gee as ’n kans op ’n beter lewe? Is dit nie wat jy nog altyd wou hê nie? Is dit nie waarom jy so jonk van die huis af is nie?”

“Ek het weggegaan omdat ek my eie keuses wou maak!”

Hy plaas sy hande om haar middel. “Jy het my gekies.”

*In voor- en teëspoed, in rykdom of armoede ...*

Niclas trek haar van agter teen hom vas. Sy was nog altyd weerloos teen die gevoelens wat sy aanraking in haar wakker maak. Sy wil dit weerstaan, maar voel hoe sy sag word. Toe sy teen hom terugleun, draai hy haar om en omhels haar. Wanneer hy sy mond van hare lig, laat sak sy haar kop teen sy bors. Sy hart klop swaar en vinnig.

“Vertrou my.”

Marta sluit haar oë en sê niks nie.

“As jy my nie kan vertrou nie, vertrou God. Hy het die deure oopgemaak.”

Marta wens sy kon dit glo.

# Part Two: Hildemara Rose

## Chapter 15

**1921**

The passenger car bumped and jerked, moving slowly down the track. On her knees, Hildemara looked out the window at the passing houses as the train picked up speed. She slid down onto the seat again, feeling dizzy, her stomach queasy. Mama had made her eat breakfast even though her appetite had waned with excitement over the trip south in the United States of America. Now, she felt her full stomach rolling as the wheels clicked along the track.

"You look pale, Marta." Papa frowned. "Are you feeling all right?"

"No better than I felt coming across the Atlantic." Mama leaned her head back against the seat. "Watch the children."

Bernhard and Clotilde ran up and down the aisle, until Papa told them to sit down and be quiet. Mama took one look at Hildemara and called Papa back. "You'd better take her to the washroom and quick." Hildemara barely made it inside the little cubicle at the back of the car. She cried when nothing more came up, feeling no better for it. Papa brought her back to Mama.

"She lost her breakfast. She's sweating and feels cold."

"Lie down, Hildemara." Mama stroked the hair back from her face. "Go to sleep."

One day rolled miserably into the next as they traveled. Hildemara was too sick to care when they went through customs or changed trains. Bernhard and Clotilde chattered about every little thing they saw out the window while Hildemara couldn't raise her head from the bench. Mama snapped at Papa. "You have to watch them, Niclas. I can't. I don't feel much better than Hildemara. I can't get up and chase after Bernhard and Clotilde."

"What am I supposed to do with them?"

"Keep them from annoying other passengers. And don't let them out of your sight."

"They can't go anywhere."

"They can fall between cars! They can get off the train when it stops! If you're going to the dining car to talk with those men again, take them with you. I can't run after them."

"All right, Marta. Lie down and rest. You look worse than Hildemara."

"I hate trains!"

Papa called Bernhard and Clotilde back and made them sit and look out the window. "Be good for your mama. She's not feeling well. I'll be back soon."

"Niclas!" Mama half rose from her seat before lying down again, a hand over her eyes. Antsy after a few minutes, Bernhard wanted to know how long before the train reached California. "We'll get there when we get there, and stop asking that same question over and over. I'm not so sick I can't turn you over my knee!"

Clotilde poked at Hildemara, wanting to play, but Hildemara couldn't open her eyes without feeling everything spinning around her.

"Leave your sister alone, Clotilde."

Papa came back with bread, cheese, and a bottle of water. Hildemara sipped a little water, but the smell of the cheese made her stomach turn again.

"She's not going to get better until we get off the train, Niclas."

"What's it going to be like in California?"

"Papa's already told you, Bernhard."

"Tell me again!"

"California has orchards of orange trees. You'll be able to eat as many as you want. The sun shines all year. That's why they can grow anything in California. We'll find a nice house on some land, and you and your sisters will have space around you, too. You'll be able to run and play in the orchards. No more having to stay inside a house all the time."

Mama got a pinched look around her eyes. "You said Mr. MacPherson has a job waiting for you in Sacramento."

"He said he would do what he could for me if I came." Papa ruffled Bernhard's thatch of blond hair and sat Clotilde on his lap. "We will go to Sacramento first. If there is no job, Papa knows where to find good farmland. Where would you rather be, children? In a house near the railroad with lots of dirt and smoke, or in a nice house in the sunshine in the middle of an orchard of orange trees?"

Hildemara heard her mother say something in German. Papa ignored her, listening to Bernhard and Clotilde shrieking about how many oranges they would eat when they got to California.

Papa laughed. "Farming is a job, *Sohn*. You'll have to help me."

"Be quiet!" Mama snarled. "There are other people around us." She glared at Papa. "You're filling their heads with fairy tales!"

"I'm only telling them what I was told, Marta."

“*Ja!* And Robert Madson told you wheat farming was profitable, too, didn’t he?”

Papa set Clotilde beside Mama and got up. When he headed down the aisle toward the door that went to the dining car, Mama shooed Bernhard and Clotilde. “Go on with Papa. Hurry before he leaves you behind.” They both ran noisily down the aisle, catching up just before Papa went through the door.

Hildemara wished she felt well enough to scamper through the cars. She wished the world would stop spinning. She felt afraid when Papa and Mama spoke in German to one another. Would the train ever stop longer than a few minutes? “Are there really orange trees in California, Mama?”

Sighing heavily, Mama put her hand on Hildemara’s brow. “We’ll all find out when we get there.” Hildemara liked the coolness of Mama’s hand. “Try to sit up for a while. You have to try to eat something. A little bread, at least. You have little chicken legs.”

“I’ll be sick.”

“You won’t know unless you try. Now, come on. Sit up.”

When she did, the dizziness returned. She gagged when she tried to swallow a piece of bread.

“Hush now, Hildemara. Don’t cry. At least you tried. That’s something, at least.” Mama tucked a blanket around her again. “I was seasick for days crossing the Atlantic. You’ll get over it soon. You just have to set your mind on it.”

Setting her mind on it didn’t help one bit. By the time they reached Sacramento, Hildemara was too weak to stand, let alone walk off the train. Mama had to carry her while Papa collected the two trunks.

They stayed in a hotel near the train station. Hildemara ate her first meal in days in the dining room: a bowl of soup and some crackers.

It rained all night. Papa went out early the next morning and still wasn’t back when Mama said it was time for bed.

Hildemara awakened. “Don’t touch me!” Mama cried out. Papa spoke softly in German, but Mama answered angrily in English. “You lied to me, Niclas. That’s the truth.” Papa spoke quietly again. “English, Niclas, or I won’t answer you.” Mama dropped her voice. “Americans won’t like Germans any better than Canadians did.”

The sun didn’t shine for days. They didn’t see an orange tree until Mama took them for a walk to the capitol building. Mama spoke to a

gardener and told them they could each have one orange. They thanked him politely before peeling the skins. The gardener leaned on his rake, frowning. “They’re still a little green, ma’am.”

“It’s a good lesson for them.”

Mama and Papa argued all the time. Papa wanted to look for land to buy. Mama said no. “You don’t know enough about farming to waste money on land.”

“What do you want me to do? We’re spending money staying in this hotel. I have to find work.”

“If I buy anything, it’ll be another boardinghouse.”

“And then what would I do? Strip beds? Do the laundry? No! I’m the head of this family!” He spoke German again, fast, furious.

“It’s in my name, Niclas. Not yours! You didn’t earn that money. I did!”

A neighbor pounded on the wall, shouting for them to shut up. Mama cried.

Papa came back to the hotel the next afternoon with train tickets. At the mention of another train ride, Hildemara started to cry. “Don’t worry, *Liebling*, this will only be a short ride—just eighty miles.”

Mama hunkered down and gripped her by the shoulders. “Stop it! If I can stand it, so can you.” Mama took her by the hand and pulled her along to the train station.

When Papa took his seat, Mama swung Hildemara up and planted her on his lap. “If she throws up, let it be all over you this time!” Mama sat on the other side of the aisle, face turned away, staring out the window.

*“Schlaf, Kleine,”* Papa said. A man in front of them turned around and stared coldly. Papa spoke English this time. “Go to sleep, little one.”

“German, are you?”

Mama got up and sat next to Papa. “Swiss! We came down from Canada. He still has some trouble with English. My husband is an engineer. Unfortunately, the supervisor who promised him a position moved to Southern California.”

The man looked between Mama and Papa. “Well, good luck to you folks.” He turned around again.

Papa set Hildemara on the seat with Bernhard and Clotilde. “Take care of your sisters, *Sohn*.” Papa took Mama’s hand and kissed it. Mama stared straight forward, her face pale and set.

Hildemara roused when a man came through the car announcing

Murietta.

Bernhard pushed at her, and Clotilde slipped by and ran for the door until Mama told her to stop and wait. The air felt cool against Hildemara's face when she climbed down the steps. Papa swung her onto the platform and gave her a light swat. Mama stood waiting beneath a big sign. She looked down a long, dusty street. She sighed heavily. "We left Winnipeg for this?"

"It's not raining." Papa hefted one trunk onto his shoulder and dragged the other toward an office.

Hildemara looked up at Mama's stony face. "Where's Papa going?"

"He's going to have the trunks stored until we find a place to live."

Papa came back empty-handed. "The station manager said there is only one place to stay in town."

Bernhard and Clotilde skipped ahead while Hildemara reached for Mama's hand. Mama wouldn't let her take it. She patted Hildemara's back. "Go on with your brother and sister."

"I want to stay with you."

"Go on, I said!"

Papa leaned down and tipped Hildemara's trembling chin. "No need for tears, *Liebling*. We're right behind you."

Hildemara walked ahead, but kept checking back over her shoulder. Mama looked annoyed. Papa looked relaxed and happy. Hildemara stayed close enough to hear Papa say, "It is a fine town, Marta, everything dressed up for Christmas." When Bernhard called out, Hildemara ran to join them at a big window. She gasped at the beautiful glass Christmas ornaments in boxes.

"Come on, children." Mama herded them along.

Across the street was a theater. They passed by a general store, a shoe repair and tack shop, a bakery, pool hall, and café. When they came to a two-story brown building with white-trimmed windows and a long wooden porch with four rocking chairs, Mama told them to stay with Papa, glancing at him. "You can take the children for a walk while I take care of business." Lifting her long skirt, she went up the front steps.

Papa told Bernhard to run to the first intersection and back. He did it twice before he was settled enough to walk quietly and stop asking questions. Papa took them around the corner and down to another street lined with large trees. "We're walking on Elm Street.

What kind of trees do you suppose those are?”

“Elm!” Bernhard and Hildemara said at once. “I said it first!” Bernhard insisted.

Each house had a lawn. When Papa came to another street, he turned back toward Main. “Look over there at that big pink-brick building. It’s a library. That should put a smile on Mama’s face.” He led them across Main Street and kept walking. They hadn’t gone far when they came to orchards and vineyards. Exhausted, Hildemara lagged behind. When she cried out for him to wait, he came back and swung her up onto his shoulders.

Bernhard never seemed to tire. “Are those orange trees, Papa?”

“No. I don’t know what they are. Why don’t we ask?” He swung Hildemara down and told her to watch out for Clotilde while he talked to the farmer digging a ditch between two rows of vines. Almond trees, the man said, and wine grapes across the road.

“Thirsty,” Clotilde said. Hildemara took her by the hand and led her under the shade of one of the trees. Bernhard asked if he could dig. The man handed over the shovel. The two men went on talking while Bernhard tried to scoop more sandy dirt from the ditch the man had been digging. Clotilde got up and went over to Papa, tugging at his pants. “Hungry, Papa.” He patted her on the head and kept asking questions. Clotilde tugged again, harder. When Papa ignored her, she cried. Papa shook the man’s hand, then asked if he could come back tomorrow and talk some more.

Face flushed, Mama got up from a rocking chair on the porch. “Where have you been?”

“We met a farmer!” Bernhard bounded up the steps. “He let me dig a ditch!”

When Papa put Clotilde down, she tugged at Mama’s skirt. “Hungry, Mama.”

Hildemara was too tired and parched to say anything.

“Did you give a thought to how weak Hildemara is after that awful train ride from Winnipeg? She looks ready to faint.”

“You told me to take them for a walk.”

Mama took Hildemara’s hand and started across the street. “Around the block, not out into the countryside. It’s past three! They haven’t eaten since breakfast.”

“Time got away from me.”

Mama went into the café. They took seats by the window looking out onto Main Street. Papa asked what they wanted to eat, and Mama

told the waitress everyone would have “the special.” Mama folded her hands on the table. “The town is having a Christmas pageant tonight. That’s something, at least.”

“There’s a library one street over and two blocks down.”

Mama brightened, but her expression clouded over quickly enough. “Mrs. Cavanaugh would only come down twenty-five cents a night if I guaranteed a week.”

“Stop worrying. God will lead me to work.” When the waitress brought the plates, Papa said grace.

Hildemara didn’t like the thick, greasy stew. After a few bites, she put her spoon down. Mama frowned. “You have to eat, Hildemara.”

“She hasn’t eaten much of anything for a long time. Maybe her stomach isn’t up to it. Would you like something else, Hildemara? some soup?”

“Don’t baby her!” Mama leaned forward. “You’re down to skin and bones. You eat that food or you’ll be sitting in the hotel room while the rest of us go to the Christmas pageant.”

Head down, fighting tears, Hildemara picked up her spoon. Bernhard and Clotilde finished their dinner quickly and wanted to play. Hildemara still had half a bowl of stew left to eat. Papa took Bernhard and Clotilde outside. Mama sat watching her. “The meat, at least, Hildemara.” Leaning across the table, she poked through the bowl of stew, separating bits of meat and a few vegetables. “Eat this much and drink all of the milk.” Other families came in and ordered meals.

“It’ll be dark before you’re finished.” Mama sounded annoyed. “But we’re not leaving this table until you do. You won’t grow stronger otherwise.” Leaning back in her chair, Mama grimaced.

“Are you mad, Mama?”

Mama stared off down the street. “Not at you.”

When Hildemara finally managed to swallow the last piece of carrot, Mama took some coins from her purse and gave them to the waitress. Hildemara’s legs ached after the long walk with Papa, but she didn’t complain. She clutched Mama’s hand more tightly when they came near a crowd gathering at the center of town. Other children stood with their parents, and everyone looked at them as they walked through the crowd. Hildemara stayed as close to Mama’s side as she could without stepping on her hem. Mama kept craning her neck. “There’s Papa.” He stood with the man who had been

digging a ditch, and several others had joined them. “Where’s Bernhard? Where’s Clotilde?” Mama looked around.

“Over there.” Papa pointed toward a group of children standing near a platform. He grinned. “Santa Claus is coming.” He returned his attention to the men.

“Go on, Hildemara.”

“No.” She didn’t want to let go of Mama’s hand.

Mama leaned down. “Clotilde is almost two years younger than you and she’s not afraid. Now, go on.” She looked into Hildemara’s eyes and her expression softened. “I’m right here. I can see you, and you can see me.” She turned Hildemara around and gave her a gentle push.

Hildemara looked for her brother and sister. She could see them toward the front, near the platform. Biting her lip, Hildemara stayed near the back, afraid to make her way between the others.

A man mounted the wooden platform and gave a speech. Then four men came up in vests, one with a harmonica, and they sang. Everyone clapped so loudly, they sang another. A little girl in a short green and red satin dress, black tights, and an embroidered vest came up onto the platform. While someone played a fiddle, the girl’s feet tapped, her red curls bouncing up and down. Hildemara stared in fascination. When the song ended, the girl held out her skirt and curtsied, then ran down the steps to her proud mother.

“Santa’s coming!” someone shouted, and bells jingled as a big man dressed in a red suit fringed with white appeared. He wore high black boots and carried a big sack on his back and called out “Ho! Ho! Ho!” to the excited laughter of children.

Terrified, Hildemara looked back. Mama was laughing. When Papa put his arm around her, she didn’t try to pull away. Hildemara turned back to the platform and watched her brother and sister swarming onto the platform with the other children. Hildemara didn’t move.

The man in red raised his head and called out in a booming voice. “It’s a stampede!” Laughing with the crowd, he bent down and pulled out a small bag, handing it to the little girl in the green and red dress with the shiny black shoes. More bags appeared, clutched by excited hands.

When Bernhard came down from the platform, he had already opened his. It was filled with hard candy with flowery designs, peanuts covered in chocolate, and candy-covered almonds. Clotilde

had a paper sack, too. “Can I have one?” Hildemara asked. Clotilde jerked her sack away and turned her back.

“Hildemara!” Mama called. She waved her hand. Hildemara understood. She was to go up on that platform and get a sack, too. Only she couldn’t. When she looked up at the big man and all those children surrounding him, she couldn’t move.

“Aren’t you going?” Bernhard jutted his chin. When she shook her head, he thrust his sack into her hand and dashed up the steps.

“Back again?” Santa shook his head. “One sack per customer, sonny.”

“It’s for my sister.” Bernhard called out and pointed at her.

Santa looked down at her. “Come on up here, little girl. I won’t bite you.” People laughed all around her. Someone pushed her. Hildemara dug her heels in and started to cry. Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Mama frown and close her eyes.

Bernhard returned to Hildemara’s side. “Stop crying like a baby!” Bernhard growled, thrusting the sack of candy into her hand. Clotilde shrieked and ran toward Mama and Papa, holding her sack high. Head down, Hildemara followed Bernhard back to where Mama and Papa waited.

Mama stared at her. It wasn’t the first time time Hildemara had seen disappointment in her mother’s eyes.

## *Hildemara Rose*

# Hoofstuk 15

## 1921

Die passasierswa wip en kom rukkend in beweging. Hildemara staan op haar knieë en kyk deur die venster hoe die huise verbybeweeg namate die trein spoed vermeerder. Sy voel lighoofdig en effens naar toe sy weer plat op die bankie sit. Mamma het haar gedwing om ontbyt te eet, selfs al het die opgewondenheid oor die rit na die Verenigde State gemaak dat sy haar eetlus verloor het. Nou voel sy hoe haar vol maag draai terwyl die wiele oor die spore klik.

"Jy is bleek, Marta." Pappa frons. "Voel jy sleg?"

"Niks beter as toe ek met die skip gekom het nie." Mamma leun agteroor teen die sitplek. "Kyk tog na die kinders."

Bernhard en Clotilde hardloop in die gangetjie op en af totdat Pappa hulle aansê om te kom sit en op te hou gil. Mamma gee Hildemara een kyk en roep Pappa terug. "Jy beter haar kleedkamer toe neem, en gou." Hildemara maak dit nouliks tot by die klein hokkie agter in die wa. Sy huil toe niks meer wil uitkom nie, en voel steeds nie beter nie. Pappa neem haar weer na Mamma toe.

"Haar hele ontbyt het uitgekom. Sy is papnat gesweet en voel koud."

"Kom lê, Hildemara." Mamma streel haar hare uit haar gesig. "Probeer bietjie slaap."

Die dae op die trein vloei troosteloos inmekaar. Hildemara is te siek om om te gee of hulle deur die doeane gaan of op 'n ander trein klim. Bernhard en Clotilde kwetter oor elke liewe dingetjie wat hulle deur die venster sien terwyl Hildemara nie haar kop van die bank kan oplig nie.

"Jy moet na hulle kyk, Niclas," kom dit kortaf van Mamma. "Ek kan nie. Ek voel nie veel beter as Hildemara nie. Ek kan nie opstaan en agter Bernhard en Clotilde aanhardloop nie."

"Wat is ék veronderstel om met hulle te maak?"

“Sorg dat hulle nie die ander passasiers pla nie. En moet hulle nie onder jou oë laat uitgaan nie.”

“Hulle kan nêrens heen gaan nie.”

“Hulle kan tussen die waens inval! Hulle kan afklim wanneer die trein stilhou! Vat hulle saam met jou as jy na die eetwa toe gaan om weer met daardie mans te gesels. Ek kan nie agter hulle aanhardloop nie.”

“Nou goed, Marta. Probeer ’n bietjie slaap. Jy lyk erger as Hildemara.”

“Ek haat treine!”

Pappa roep Bernhard en Clotilde, beveel hulle om te sit en sê hulle moet deur die venster kyk. “Wees nou soet by julle mamma. Sy voel nie lekker nie. Ek is nou weer terug.”

“Niclas!” Mamma kom half op voordat sy weer lê, ’n hand oor haar oë.

Ná ’n paar minute wil Bernhard kriewelrig weet hoe lank dit nog is voordat hulle in Kalifornië gaan wees. “Ek weet nie, Bernhard. Hou nou op om dieselfde vraag oor en oor te vra. Ek is nie te siek om jou oor my skoot te trek nie!”

Clotilde kielie Hildemara, maar Hildemara kan nie haar oë oopmaak sonder om te voel hoe alles om haar draai nie.

“Los jou sussie uit, Clotilde.”

Pappa kom terug met brood en kaas en ’n bottel water. Hildemara drink ’n paar slukkies water, maar die reuk van die kaas laat die naarheid weer in haar opstoot.

“Sy gaan nie beter word voordat ons van die trein afklim nie, Niclas.”

“Hoe gaan dit in Kalifornië wees?”

“Pappa het al vir jou gesê, Bernhard.”

“Sê my weer!”

“Kalifornië het boorde vol lemoenbome. ’n Mens kan soveel eet as wat jy wil. Die son skyn die hele jaar deur. Dis waarom ’n mens enigiets in Kalifornië kan plant. Ons gaan in ’n lekker huis op ’n stukkie grond bly, en jy en jou sussies gaan baie plek hê. Julle sal kan rondhardloop en in die boorde speel. En julle sal nie meer die hele tyd in die huis moet bly nie.”

Daar verskyn ’n gepynigde kyk om Marta se oë. “Jy het gesê meneer MacPherson gaan vir jou in Sacramento werk kry.”

“Hy het gesê hy sal sy bes vir my doen as ek kom.” Pappa krap sy vingers deur Bernhard se blonde hare en tel Clotilde op sy skoot. “Ons

sal eerste Sacramento toe gaan. As daar nie werk is nie, weet ek waar ’n mens goeie grond kan kry. Waar sal julle eerder wil bly, kinders? In ’n huis naby die spoorweg met baie roet en rook, of in ’n lekker huisie in die sonskyn in die middel van ’n lemoenboord?”

Hildemara hoor haar ma iets in Duits sê. Pappa ignoreer haar en luister hoe Bernhard en Clotilde babbel oor al die lemoene wat hulle gaan eet wanneer hulle in Kalifornië aankom.

Pappa lag. “Dis werk om te boer, *Sohn*. Jy sal my moet help.”

“Bly stil!” blaf Mamma. “Daar is ander mense om ons.” Sy gluur na Pappa. “Jy is besig om hulle koppe vol feëverhale te stop!”

“Ek vertel hulle net wat daar aan my vertel is, Marta.”

“Ja! En Robert Madson het jou vertel dat jy gaan ryk word uit koring, nè?”

Pappa sit Clotilde langs Mamma neer en staan op. Toe hy in die gang afloop na die deur wat na die eetwa lei, jaag Mamma Bernhard en Clotilde agterna. “Gaan saam met Pappa. Maak gou voordat julle agterbly.” Hulle hardloop luidrugtig in die gang af en bereik Pappa net voordat hy by die deur uitgaan.

Hildemara wens sy het goed genoeg gevoel om tussen die waens rond te draf. Sy wens die wêreld wil ophou draai. Sy raak bang wanneer Pappa en Mamma in Duits met mekaar praat. Gaan die trein ooit vir langer as ’n paar minute stilstaan? “Is daar regtig lemoenbome in Kalifornië, Mamma?”

Mamma sug swaar en plaas ’n hand op Hildemara se voorkop. “Ons sal uitvind wanneer ons daar kom.” Hildemara hou van die koelheid van Mamma se hand. “Probeer ’n bietjie regop sit. Jy moet probeer om iets te eet. Toe, net ’n stukkie brood. Jy het klein hoenderbeentjies.”

“Ek gaan naar word.”

“Jy sal nie weet as jy nie probeer nie. Toe nou, sit regop.”

Toe sy orent kom, is die lighoofdigheid terug. Sy wil opgooi toe sy ’n stukkie brood probeer sluk.

“Toemaar, Hildemara. Moenie huil nie. Ten minste het jy probeer. Dis darem iets.” Mamma wikkel haar weer toe in die kombers. “Ek was dae lank naar toe ek met die boot Kanada toe gekom het. Jy sal oor ’n rukkie begin beter voel. Jy moet net daarop konsentreer.”

Om daarop te konsentreer help net mooi niks nie. Teen die tyd dat hulle Sacramento bereik, is Hildemara so swak dat sy nie kan regop bly nie, laat staan nog van die trein kan afklim. Mamma moet haar dra terwyl Pappa die twee trommels gaan haal.

Hulle bly in ’n hotel naby die stasie. Hildemara eet haar eerste maaltyd in dae in die eetkamer: ’n bakkie sop en ’n paar brosbeskuitjies.

Dit reën die hele nag. Pappa gaan die volgende oggend vroeg uit en is nog nie terug toe Mamma hulle in die bed sit nie.

Hildemara word wakker. “Moenie aan my raak nie!” raas Mamma. Pappa praat sag in Duits, maar Mamma antwoord kwaai in Engels. “Jy het vir my gejok, Niclas. Dis die waarheid.” Pappa praat weer sag. “Engels, Niclas, anders gaan ek jou nie antwoord nie.” Mamma vervolg sagter. “Die Amerikaners sal net so min soos die Kanadese van Duitsers hou.”

Dis dae voordat hulle die son sien. Dis eers toe Mamma hulle vir ’n uitstappie na die staatsgebou toe neem dat hulle ’n lemoenboom sien. Mamma praat met ’n tuinier en sê dat hulle elkeen een lemoen kan kry. Hulle bedank die man beleefd voordat hulle begin skil. Die tuinier leun op sy hark en frons. “Hulle is nog groenerig, Mevrou.”

“Dit sal ’n goeie les vir hulle wees.”

Mamma en Pappa stry amper die hele tyd. Pappa wil ’n stuk grond koop. Mamma sê nee. “Jy weet nie genoeg van boer om ons geld op ’n stuk grond te mors nie.”

“Wat wil jy hê moet ek doen? Ons geld gaan alles in die hotelkamer in. Ek moet werk kry.”

“As ek enigiets gaan koop, sal dit nog ’n losieshuis wees.”

“En wat moet ek dan doen? Beddens oortrek? Wasgoed was? Nee! Ek is die hoof van hierdie gesin!” Dan praat hy weer Duits, vinnig en kwaai.

“Dit is op my naam, Niclas. Nie joune nie! Ek het daardie geld verdien. Nie jy nie!”

Een van die bure slaan teen die muur en gil dat hulle moet stilbly. Mamma huil.

Die volgende middag kom Pappa met treinkaartjies by die huis aan. Hildemara begin huil toe sy hoor dat hulle weer gaan treinry. “Moenie bekommerd wees nie, *Liebling*, dit gaan ’n kort rit wees – net twaalf kilometer.”

Mamma sak op haar hurke neer en vat Hildemara aan die skouers. “Hou op! As ek dit kan oorleef, kan jy ook.” Mamma neem haar aan die hand en sleep haar so te sê tot by die stasie.

Toe Pappa gaan sit, tel Mamma Hildemara op en plant haar op sy skoot. “As sy opgooi, kan dit hierdie keer oor jou wees!” Mamma sit aan die ander kant van die paadjie, haar gesig weggekeer na die

venster.

"*Schlaf, Kleine*," sê Pappa. Die man voor hulle draai met 'n ysige blik na hulle. Pappa praat hierdie keer in Engels. "Slaap 'n bietjie, kleinste."

"Is julle Duits?"

Mamma staan op en kom sit langs Pappa. "Switsers! Ons kom van Kanada af. My man sukkel nog met die Engels. Hy is 'n ingenieur. Ongelukkig is die man wat hom 'n werk aangebied het, na Kalifornië verplaas."

Die man kyk van Mamma na Pappa. "Nou ja, alles van die beste vir julle." Hy draai vorentoe.

Pappa sit Hildemara langs Bernhard en Clotilde op die bank neer. "Kyk na jou sussies, *Sohn*." Pappa neem Mamma se hand en soen dit. Mamma kyk stip voor haar, haar gesig bleek en strak.

Hildemara word wakker toe 'n man verbyloop en aankondig dat hulle in Murietta is.

Bernhard stoot haar uit sy pad en Clotilde glip verby en pyl op die deur af totdat Mamma haar beveel om te wag. Die lug is koel teen Hildemara se gesig toe sy met die trappies afklim. Pappa swaai haar tot op die platform en klap haar liggies op die sitvlak. Mamma staan onder 'n groot bord en wag. Sy kyk na die lang, stowwerige straat en sug swaar. "En ons het Winnipeg hiervoor gelos?"

"Dit reën nie." Pappa laai die een trommel op sy skouer en sleep die ander in die rigting van 'n kantoor.

Hildemara kyk na Mamma se kwaai gesig. "Waarnatoe gaan Pappa?"

"Hy gaan die trommels laat stoor totdat ons 'n plek kry om te bly."

Pappa kom leë hande terug. "Die stasiebestuurder sê daar is net een plek om te bly in die dorp."

Bernhard en Clotilde huppel vooruit terwyl Hildemara haar hand na Mamma s'n uitsteek. Mamma neem dit nie. Sy klop Hildemara liggies op haar rug. "Gaan saam met jou boetie en sussie."

"Ek wil by Mamma bly."

"Toe, hulle gaan nie vir jou wag nie."

Pappa buk en lig Hildemara se bewende kennetjie. "Dis nie nodig vir trane nie, *Liebling*. Ons is net hier agter julle."

Hildemara loop vooruit, maar bly oor haar skouer kyk. Mamma lyk ergerlik. Pappa lyk ontspanne en gelukkig. Hildemara bly naby genoeg om Pappa te hoor sê: "Dit is 'n mooi dorp, Marta, so met al die Kersversierings." Toe Bernhard uitroep, hardloop Hildemara na waar

hulle voor ’n groot venster staan. Sy snak na haar asem toe sy die lieflike Kersornamente van glas sien.

“Kom nou, kinders” keer Mamma hulle aan.

Aan die oorkant van die straat is daar ’n teater. Hulle loop verby ’n algemene handelaar, ’n skoen- en tuigwinkel, ’n bakkery, potspellokaal en teekamer. Toe hulle by ’n dubbelverdiepinggebou met wit vensterrame en ’n lang houtstoep met vier skommelstoele aankom, beveel Mamma hulle om by Pappa te bly en kyk na hom. “Jy kan met die kinders gaan stap terwyl ek met die mense praat.” Sy lig haar lang rok voordat sy by die stoeptrappe opgaan.

Pappa sê Bernhard moet tot by die eerste kruising en terug hardloop. Hy doen dit twee maal voordat hy uitgeput genoeg is om rustig te loop en op te hou met sy vrae. Hulle loop saam met Pappa om die hoek en dan tot by ’n straat met groot bome. “Ons is nou in Olmstraat. Watter soort bome dink julle groei hier?”

“Olms!” sê Bernhard en Hildemara gelyk. “Ek was eerste!” kom dit haastig van Bernhard.

Elke huis het ’n grasperk. Toe Pappa by die volgende straat kom, draai hulle terug na Main. “Kyk net na daardie groot rooibaksteengebou. Dit is ’n biblioteek. Dit behoort Mamma te laat glimlag.” Hy lei hulle oor die straat en hou aan loop. Net ’n klein entjie verder bereik hulle ’n plek met boorde en wingerde. Hildemara het agter geraak. Toe sy roep dat hy moet wag, kom hy terug en tel haar op sy skouers.

Dit lyk nie of Bernhard ooit moeg word nie. “Is dit lemoenbome, Pappa?”

“Nee. Ek weet nie watse bome hierdie is nie. Hoekom vra ons nie?” Hy tel Hildemara af en sê sy moet ’n ogie oor Clotilde hou terwyl hy met die boer praat wat besig is om ’n sloot tussen twee rye wingerde te grawe. Amandelbome, sê die man, en dis wyndruiwe daar oorkant die straat.

“Dors,” sê Clotilde. Hildemara neem haar aan die hand en hulle gaan sit in die skaduwee van een van die bome. Bernhard vra of hy kan grawe. Die man gee die graaf vir hom. Die twee mans praat verder terwyl Bernhard probeer om nog grond uit die sloot te grawe waarmee die man besig was. Clotilde staan op en loop na Pappa toe en trek aan sy broek. “Honger, Pappa.” Hy vryf oor haar kop en hou aan vrae vra. Clotilde pluk weer, harder. Toe Pappa haar ignoreer, begin sy huil. Pappa skud die man se hand en vra of hy môre kan terugkom om verder te praat.

Mamma se gesig is rooi toe sy opstaan van waar sy op een van die skommelstoele op die stoep gesit en wag het. “Waar was julle?”

“Ons het ’n boer ontmoet!” Bernhard hardloop die trappies op. “Ek het hom gehelp om ’n sloot te grawe!”

Toe Pappa Clotilde neersit, trek sy aan Mamma se rok. “Honger, Mamma.”

Hildemara is te moeg en dors om enigiets te sê.

“Het jy ooit daaraan gedink hoe swak Hildemara na daardie aaklige treinrit van Winnipeg af moet wees? Dit lyk asof sy enige oomblik gaan omval.”

“Jy het gesê ek moet met hulle gaan stap.”

Mamma neem Hildemara se hand en begin oor die straat stap. “Om die blok, nie die veld in nie. Dis al ná drie! Hulle het ontbyt laas geëet.”

“Ek het heeltemal van die tyd vergeet.”

Mamma gaan by die teekamer in. Hulle gaan sit langs die venster wat op Mainstraat uitkyk. Pappa vra wat hulle wil eet en Mamma sê vir die kelnerin dat hulle almal die “special” sal neem. Mamma vou haar hande op die tafel. “Daar gaan vanaand ’n Kersspel in die dorp wees. Dis darem iets.”

“Daar is ’n biblioteek twee blokke van hier af.”

Mamma se gesig verhelder, maar net vir ’n oomblik. “Mevrou Cavanaugh wou nie met haar prys afkom voordat ek kon waarborg dat ons ’n week sou bly nie.”

“Hou op om jou so te bekommer. Die Here sal vir my ’n werk voorsien.” Pappa bid toe die kelnerin hulle borde bring.

Hildemara hou nie van die dik, vetterige bredie nie. Ná ’n paar happies sit sy haar lepel neer. Mamma frons. “Jy moet eet, Hildemara.”

“Sy het lanklaas enigiets ordentliks geëet. Dalk is haar maag nie sterk genoeg nie. Wil jy iets anders hê, Hildemara? ’n Bietjie sop?”

“Moet haar nie oppiep nie!” Mamma leun vorentoe. “Jy is net vel en been. As jy nie jou kos eet nie, gaan jy in die hotelkamer bly terwyl die res van ons na die Kersspel gaan kyk.”

Hildemara baklei teen die trane toe sy kop onderstebo haar lepel optel. Bernhard en Clotilde het gou klaar geëet en wil speel. Hildemara het nog die helfte van haar bredie oor. Pappa neem Bernhard en Clotilde buitentoe. Mamma sit na haar en kyk. “Dan tog net die vleis, Hildemara.” Sy leun oor die tafel en krap ’n paar stukkies vleis en groente eenkant toe. “Eet net hierdie bietjie en drink al jou

melk." Ander gesinne kom in en bestel hulle kos.

"Dit gaan donker wees voordat jy klaar is." Mamma klink vies. "Maar ons gaan nie opstaan voordat jy klaar geëet het nie. Anders gaan jy nie sterker word nie." Mamma lyk ongelukkig toe sy terugsit.

"Is Mamma kwaad?"

Mamma staar in die straat af. "Nie vir jou nie."

Toe Hildemara uiteindelik daarin slaag om die laaste stukkie wortel af te sluk, haal Mamma 'n paar muntstukke uit haar beursie en gee dit vir die kelnerin. Hildemara se bene is seer na die lang stap saam met Pappa, maar sy kla nie. Sy hou stywer aan Mamma se hand vas toe hulle 'n klomp mense in die middel van die dorp bereik. Ander kinders staan by hulle ouers en almal kyk na hulle terwyl hulle deur die skare loop. Hildemara bly so naby moontlik aan Mamma sonder om op haar soom te trap. Mamma rek haar nek. "Daar is Pappa." Hy staan by die man wat die sloot gegrawe het, en 'n paar ander het by hulle aangesluit. "Waar's Bernhard? Waar's Clotilde?" Mamma kyk rond.

"Daar oorkant." Pappa wys na 'n groep kinders wat naby 'n verhogie staan. Hy grinnik. "Kersvader is op pad!" Hy draai weer na die mans.

"Gaan kyk wat hulle daar maak, Hildemara."

"Nee." Sy wil nie Mamma se hand los nie.

Mamma buk by haar. "Clotilde is amper twee jaar jonger as jy en sy is nie bang nie. Toe, gaan nou." Sy kyk in Hildemara se oë en haar uitdrukking versag. "Ek is net hier. Ek kan jou sien, en jy kan my sien." Sy draai Hildemara om en stoot haar liggies in die kinders se rigting.

Hildemara soek na haar boetie en sussie en uiteindelik sien sy hulle voor, naby die verhogie. Sy byt op haar lip en gaan staan tussen die agterste kinders, bang om haar weg deur die ander te baan.

'n Man klim op die houtverhogie en lewer 'n toespraak. Dan kom vier mans na vore, een met 'n mondfluitjie en hulle sing. Die mense klap so entoesiasties dat hulle nog 'n liedjie sing. 'n Klein dogtertjie in 'n kort groen-en-rooi satynrok, swart kouse en 'n geborduurde baadjie kom staan op die verhoog. Iemand speel viool en die meisietjie se rooi krulle wip op en af terwyl haar voete vinnig en rats beweeg. Hildemara staar gefassineerd. Toe die liedjie klaar is, hou die meisie haar romp uit en maak 'n kniebuiging voordat sy na haar trotse ma toe draf.

"Kersvader is hier!" roep iemand en klokkies klingel toe 'n groot man in 'n rooi pak sy verskyning maak. Hy dra lang swart stewels en

’n groot sak op sy rug en roep: “Ho! Ho! Ho!” tot die opgewonde kinders se vermaak.

Hildemara kyk verskrik om. Mamma lag. Pappa sit sy arm om haar en sy probeer hom nie wegdruk nie. Hildemara draai terug na die verhoog en kyk hoe haar broer en suster saam met die ander kinders na die platform toe stroom. Hildemara staan doodstil.

Die man in rooi kyk op en sê in ’n bulderende stem. “Dis ’n stormloop!” Hy lag saam met die mense, haal ’n klein sakkie uit en gee dit vir die klein dogtertjie in die groen-en-rooi rok met die blink swart skoene. Hy bring nog sakkies te voorskyn en die kinders gryp met opgewonde hande daarna.

Toe Bernhard van die verhogie afklim, het hy syne reeds oopgemaak. Dit is vol veelkleurige lekkers, neute in sjokolade en versuikerde amandels. Clotilde het ook ’n papiersakkie. “Kan ek een kry?” vra Hildemara. Clotilde ruk haar sak weg en draai met haar rug na haar.

“Hildemara!” roep Mamma. Sy waai vir haar. Hildemara verstaan. Sy moet ook na die verhogie toe gaan en ’n sakkie gaan haal. Maar sy kan nie. Toe sy na die groot man en al die kinders by hom kyk, kan sy nie beweeg nie.

“Gaan jy nie gaan nie?” Bernhard stoot sy ken uit. Toe sy haar kop skud, druk hy sy sakkie in haar hande en hardloop met die trappies op.

“Is jy terug?” Kersvader skud sy kop. “Net een sakkie elk, seunie.”

“Dis vir my sussie,” roep Bernhard en wys na haar.

Kersvader kyk na haar. “Kom hiernatoe, dogtertjie. Ek sal jou nie byt nie.” Rondom haar lag die mense. Iemand stoot haar vorentoe. Hildemara steek viervoet vas en begin huil. Toe sy oor haar skouer kyk, sien sy hoe Mamma frons en haar oë toemaak.

’n Paar oomblikke later is Bernhard terug by Hildemara. “Hou op om soos ’n baba te grens!” brom hy en stop die sak lekkergoed in haar hand. Clotilde gee ’n gilletjie en hou haar sakkie in die lug toe sy na Mamma en Pappa toe hardloop. Hildemara volg Bernhard kop onderstebo na waar Mamma en Pappa wag.

Mamma kyk af na haar. Dis nie die eerste keer dat Hildemara die teleurstelling in haar ma se oë sien nie.

## Chapter 16

Papa went out every day to look for work. He met another nice man who said they could live temporarily on his property near an irrigation canal. Mama and Papa argued about it, and then Mama bought canvas to make a tent. Her fingers bled before she finished it, but she kept on, jaw set tight. “I used to dream about living with you in a bedouin tent, Niclas. Now I know it for romantic nonsense!”

Papa said Mama knew how to make all kinds of things. “Her papa was a tailor.”

Later that night, Hildemara awakened to shouting. Mama had spoken loudly many times since leaving Canada, but this time Papa shouted back. Hildemara scooted closer to Bernhard and they huddled in the darkness as Mama and Papa argued loudly in German.

“Enough!” Papa caught hold of Mama and gave her a hard shake. *“Enough!”* He spoke in a low, intense voice, but Hildemara didn’t understand the words. Crying, Mama tried to break free. He wouldn’t let her go. He said more and she started to cry, not soft, broken cries of defeat, but harsh, sobbing sounds that frightened Hildemara even more than Mama’s anger had. Papa’s hands fell away from her. He said something more and walked away.

Bernhard jumped to his feet and ran after him. “Papa! Don’t go, Papa!”

“Go back to your mother!” Papa told him.

“No! I want you, Papa!”

Papa knelt in the sandy soil and spoke to him. “I’m coming back, *Sohn*.” He straightened and looked at Mama. “God told me to bring my family here, and God will take care of us.” He put his hand on Bernhard’s head and looked down. “Do you believe me?”

“I believe you, Papa.”

“Then help Mama believe. Do what she tells you while I’m gone.” He walked off into the night.

Mama told Bernhard to get back inside the tent and go to sleep. She sat outside for a long time, her head in her hands. Then she came in and lay down between Hildemara and Clotilde. Hildemara turned to her. “I love you, Mama.”

“Hush.” Mama drew a shuddering breath and turned away. Her shoulders shook for a long time and Hildemara heard soft, muffled sounds in the darkness.

Shaking awake, Hildemara found Mama standing above her. “Get

up. There's water in the bowl. Wash up and get dressed. We're going into town."

"Is Papa back?"

"No. And we're not waiting for him." She clapped her hands. "Come on. Hurry! We're not sleeping on the ground one more night!"

When they reached town, Mama took them into the biggest store. All kinds of merchandise had been stacked up on shelves reaching to the ceiling and on tables all around the spacious room. "You can look, but don't touch," Mama told them. Turning, she gave her list to the man behind the counter.

Bernhard headed for a train set in the front window. Clotilde stood at the line of jars filled with candy, while Hildemara wandered between the rows of tables. She spotted a blue-eyed doll in a fancy dress, ribbons in its curly blonde hair. Hildemara wanted to touch it, but held her hands clasped tightly behind her back.

"Do you like that doll?"

After a brief glance at the smiling lady in the blue dress, Hildemara looked at the doll. "She's very pretty."

"Maybe Santa Claus will bring you a nice doll just like that one for Christmas."

"Papa said we already had Christmas."

"Oh? And what did you get?"

"We came to America."

It rained again that afternoon. Mama sat inside the tent, looking out while Bernhard and Clotilde played with a ball she had purchased. Hildemara chewed her nails and watched Mama. When they became hungry, Mama gave them hunks of a loaf of bread she had bought from the bakery.

Papa came back in the afternoon. Mama got up quickly and went out to him. They talked for a long time outside. When they came back inside, Mama opened two cans of Campbell's soup for dinner.

"I'll try again tomorrow." Papa sounded tired. He didn't look happy, even when he smiled at Hildie.

It was almost dark when they heard a woman call out to them. "Hello!"

Mama mumbled something in German and Papa went outside. When he called to her, Mama rose. "Stay inside! It's sprinkling again." Bernhard and Clotilde crawled over to the tent opening and peered out into the misty dusk. Hildemara joined them.

Two women sat in a carriage. Hildemara recognized the lady in

blue who had spoken to her that morning. They handed boxes down to Mama and Papa. Papa brought two inside the tent while Mama talked to the ladies. When Mama came in, her eyes were moist with tears. Hildemara leaned forward, inhaling deeply. Something smelled wonderful. When she peered out again, the lady waved to her. Hildemara waved back.

"What did they bring us, Mama?" Bernhard fell to his knees as Mama opened the first box.

"Close the flap, Hildemara," Mama said hoarsely. "You're letting the cold air in."

Papa carefully removed a large covered roasting pan. When he lifted the lid, he looked happy again. "Look how God provides. Turkey and stuffing, roasted yams."

"It's those women who provided," Mama told him tersely.

"It's God who works on the heart. Look at this feast, children."

Mama took out a jar of cranberry sauce, two tins of cookies, two loaves of fresh-baked bread, a dozen eggs, two jars of homemade jam, and several cans of milk. Sniffling, she turned away and blew her nose.

"What's in the gunnysack, Papa?"

"Well, I don't know. I guess we have to look." Papa opened it and took out the beautiful doll with blue eyes and blonde curls. "This looks exactly like you, Clotilde."

"Mine! Mine!" Clotilde clapped her hands and reached out. Hildemara's heart dropped as Papa handed the doll over to her younger sister. She bit her lip, but didn't tell Papa she knew the doll had been meant for her. She looked at Clotilde clutching it tightly against her heart and knew she'd never have it now. Hildemara sat back on her heels and blinked away tears. When she glanced up again, she saw Mama staring at her. Mama had seen her talking to the lady, and Mama had seen her admiring that doll.

"Are you going to speak up, Hildemara?"

Hildemara looked at the doll again and back at Mama.

"You'd better start learning right now you have to speak up for yourself."

"What's wrong?" Papa's eyes moved between Mama and Hildemara.

Mama was still looking at her. "Is anything wrong?"

Hildemara looked at her sister playing happily with the doll. She knew if she said it had been meant for her, Clotilde would scream and

cry. Maybe if she simply waited, Clotilde would get tired of the doll after a while and then she could play with it.

"What about me, Papa?" Bernhard pressed. "Is there anything for me?"

"Well, let's see." Papa reached into the sack and pulled out a wooden airplane. Bernhard took it and started right off pretending to fly it around the tent while Papa fished in the sack. "One more." He pulled out a rag doll with a simple blue and white dotted swiss dress, brown yarn hair, and big, brown button eyes. "And this is for you, Hildemara." Papa tossed it to her.

Bernhard spoke up. "Hildie liked the other one, Mama. She saw it at the store. She was talking to that lady—"

"Well, she didn't say so, did she? So she gets what she gets."

Papa looked at Mama. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"She has to learn to speak up!"

"She's a little girl."

"She's almost five! Clotilde is only three, and she had no trouble telling you what she wanted."

"Marta." Papa spoke in soft reprimand.

Bernhard edged between them. "There's something else in the bag, Papa."

The kind ladies hadn't forgotten anyone. Papa received a pair of leather work gloves, and Mama got a beautiful white crocheted shawl.

Papa prayed and carved the turkey, and Mama filled the plates with food. When they all finished eating the feast, Bernhard went back to playing with his airplane and Clotilde with her doll.

Hildemara felt an uncomfortable twisting inside her as she watched her sister play with the blonde, blue-eyed doll. When she noticed Mama looking at her, Hildie felt her cheeks bloom hot with shame. She bowed her head.

Mama wrapped the new shawl tightly around her shoulders and went outside. Papa put his hand on Hildie's head. "I'm sorry, *Liebling*." He rose and ducked out of the tent.

Hildemara could hear her parents talking in muted voices. Mama sounded agitated. Papa spoke German. Hildemara felt worse, knowing they were talking about her.

She sat the doll on her knees and studied it again. She thought of the lady in blue who had brought the boxes. Maybe she had made the rag doll. That made it special. Hildemara touched the glassy button eyes again and traced the stitched pink smile. "I love you no matter

how you look." Hugging it close, she lay on her mat and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders.

* * *

Mama got up before dawn every morning, made the fire, and fixed breakfast for Papa. Hildemara always awakened to their quiet voices. She felt easier with them talking to one another. When Mama yelled, Hildemara felt sick to her stomach.

"English, Niclas. You can't keep falling back into German. They will wonder if you backed the Kaiser."

"Mr. Musashi is teaching me to prune trees and vines. Mr. Pimentel has taught me a lot about the soil."

"And what good is all that if you haven't a place of your own; isn't that what you want to say?"

"Marta . . ."

"Not yet. I'm not willing to gamble."

Mama packed Papa cheese, bread, and two apples before he went off to work. Mama never ate until after Papa left, and most of the time, her breakfast didn't stay down long. "Are you sick, Mama?"

"It'll pass in a month or two." She dabbed at her forehead with the back of her hand. "And don't say a word about it to Papa. He'll know soon enough."

Mama usually felt better by midday, but she had no patience with Bernhard or Clotilde, and even less for Hildemara. Everyone did his best to stay out of her way. Mama had Bernhard bring water, and she had Hildemara straighten up the sleeping bags she had sewn out of old blankets. Clotilde played with the doll. Bernhard went fishing in the irrigation canal, but never caught anything, and Hildemara peeled potatoes while Mama washed clothes in a big washtub and hung garments on a rope she strung between two trees.

When Papa came home dusty and dirty, she had warm water and soap so he could wash. Hildemara stayed close enough to hear. "I'm taking the children to school tomorrow and register them. It would be better for them if they had a permanent address."

"Yes. And when you open your purse, we'll have a permanent address."

"Find a place to sharecrop. When you prove to me you know enough to make a living at farming, I'll give you what you need."

"I could take it, Marta. What's yours became mine when we married."

She stiffened. "We're in America now, not Germany. What's mine

stays mine unless I say otherwise. Don't think you can boss me around and I'll sit quietly by as your slave!"

Papa looked sad, not angry. "I'm not your father."

Mama winced. "No. You're not. But you refused to listen to me once before, and look what happened."

He wiped soap from the back of his neck. "Don't keep reminding me."

"You choose to forget."

He threw the towel down. "I choose to try again!"

She stepped forward, chin jutting. "And I choose to wait and see if this is God's will or man's whim!" She headed back for the washtub.

"You get more ill-tempered by the day!"

Mama lifted her head, her eyes filling with tears. "Maybe it has something to do with crossing a continent and coming to this end-of-the-road town. Maybe it has to do with winter and being cold and no roof over our heads and expecting another baby!" She wadded up his shirt and threw it in the dirt. "Wash your own clothes!" She walked off toward the irrigation canal and sat with her back to him.

When Papa finished washing, he went out and sat beside her. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side.

* * *

They dressed in their finest before Mama ushered them to town the next morning. "Stay out of the puddles and try to stay clean!" Bernhard ran ahead, but Clotilde and Hildemara walked behind Mama like goslings behind a mama goose. They walked past fragrant willows, down Main Street with its spread of buildings, across State Highway 99, and past one small general store, ending up at a small white building with a bell tower and red shingle roof.

Mama ran her hands through Bernhard's thick, blond, spiky hair and brushed down Hildemara's gingham dress. She lifted Clotilde to a bench. "You sit right here, all three of you, and don't move." She gave Bernhard a stern look. "If you wander off, Bernhard, I'll use Papa's belt on you when we get home." She had never used the belt on any of them, but the look in her eyes told them she meant business.

Bernhard fidgeted. He looked longingly at the teeter-totter and swings, the monkey bars and sandbox. Clotilde sat forward and swung her legs. Hildemara sat still, hands folded, praying she wouldn't be accepted, praying she would be able to stay home with Mama.

Mama came back. "Christmas vacation will be over after New Year's. Bernhard, you and Hildemara start school Monday next."

Hildemara's lip began to tremble.

Clotilde stuck her lower lip out. "I wanna go, too!"

"You'll have to wait. You have to be five to go to school."

"I'm not five, Mama."

"You'll be five before the end of January. That's close enough."

# Hoofstuk 16

Pappa gaan elke dag uit om werk te soek. Hy ontmoet nog ’n gawe man wat sê dat hulle tydelik op sy grond naby ’n leikanaal kan bly. Mamma en Pappa stry daaroor, en dan koop Mamma seil om ’n tent te maak. Haar vingers bloei voordat sy klaar is, maar sy hou aan, haar gesig strak. “Ek het daarvan gedroom om saam met jou in ’n Bedoeïenetent te bly, Niclas. Nou weet ek dis romantiese nonsens!”

Pappa sê Mamma weet hoe om allerhande soorte goed te maak. “Haar pappa was ’n kleremaker.”

Later die aand word Hildemara wakker van harde stemme. Mamma het al baie kere hard gepraat sedert hulle uit Kanada weg is, maar hierdie keer gil Pappa terug. Hildemara kruip nader aan Bernhard en hulle lê opgekrul in die donker terwyl Mamma en Pappa hard in Duits argumenteer.

“Genoeg!” Pappa neem Mamma aan die skouers en skud haar. “*Genoeg!*” Hy praat sag, maar Hildemara verstaan nie wat hy sê nie. Mamma probeer losruk, maar Pappa laat haar nie gaan nie. Hy praat verder en sy begin huil, nie sagte, gebroke snikke van verslaentheid nie, maar harde, rou snikke wat Hildemara nog banger maak as Mamma se woede. Pappa se hande val van haar skouers af. Hy sê nog iets en loop weg.

Bernhard spring op en hardloop agter hom aan. “Pappa! Moenie gaan nie, Pappa!”

“Gaan terug na jou ma toe!” sê Pappa vir hom.

“Nee! Ek wil vir Pappa hê!”

Pappa kniel op die grond en praat met hom. “Ek kom terug, *Sohn*.” Hy kom orent en kyk na Mamma. “God het vir my gesê om my gesin hierheen te bring en God sal vir ons sorg.” Hy plaas sy hand op Bernhard se kop en kyk af. “Glo jy my?”

“Ek glo Pappa.”

“Help dan vir Mamma om te glo. Doen wat sy sê terwyl ek weg is.” Dan loop hy die donkerte in.

Mamma beveel Bernhard om weer in die tent in te gaan en te slaap.

Sy sit lank buitekant met haar gesig in haar hande. Dan kom sy in en lê tussen Hildemara en Clotilde. Hildemara draai na haar toe. "Ek is lief vir Mamma."

"Sjuut." Mamma trek haar asem sidderend in en draai weg. Haar skouers ruk en Hildemara hoor sagte, gesmoorde geluide in die donker.

Hildemara word wakker van Mamma wat aan haar skud. "Staan op. Daar is water in die skottel. Was en trek aan. Ons gaan dorp toe."

"Is Pappa terug?"

"Nee. En ons gaan nie vir hom wag nie." Sy klap haar hande. "Kom nou. Maak gou! Ons gaan nie nog een nag op die grond slaap nie!"

Toe hulle in die dorp aankom, neem Mamma hulle na 'n baie groot winkel toe. Die volgepakte rakke staan tot teen die plafon en daar is rye tafels vol handelsware in die ruim vertrek gepak. "Julle mag kyk, maar moenie vat nie," sê Mamma. Dan draai sy om en gee haar lys vir die man agter die toonbank.

Bernhard mik na 'n treinstel in die uitstalvenster. Clotilde gaan staan voor 'n ry flesse met lekkergoed en Hildemara dwaal deur die rye tafels. Sy sien 'n blouoogpop in 'n mooi rok met linte in haar krullerige, blonde hare. Hildemara wil aan haar vat, maar hou haar hande styf agter haar rug saamgevou.

"Hou jy van daardie pop?"

Ná 'n vlugtige blik na die vriendelike vrou in die blou rok kyk Hildemara na die pop. "Sy is baie mooi."

"Dalk sal Kersvader vir jou net so 'n mooi pop vir Kersfees bring."

"Pappa het gesê ons het klaar Kersfees gehad."

"O? En wat het jy gekry?"

"Ons het Amerika toe gekom."

Daardie middag reën dit weer. Mamma sit in die tent en staar deur die tentopening terwyl Bernhard en Clotilde met 'n bal speel wat sy gekoop het. Hildemara kou haar naels en kyk na Mamma. Toe hulle honger word, gee Mamma vir hulle van die brood wat sy by die bakkery gekoop het.

Pappa kom laat die middag terug. Mamma staan vinnig op en loop hom tegemoet. Hulle staan lank buite en praat. Toe hulle weer inkom, maak Mamma twee blikkies sop oop vir aandete.

"Ek sal môre weer probeer." Pappa klink moeg. Hy lyk nie gelukkig nie, selfs nie toe hy vir Hildie glimlag nie.

Dis amper donker toe hulle 'n vrou hoor roep. "Hallo!"

Mamma mompel iets in Duits en Pappa gaan uit. Toe hy haar roep,

staan Mamma op. “Bly hier! Dit het weer begin drup.” Bernhard en Clotilde kruip tot by die tentopening en loer na die grootmense in die mistige skemer. Hildemara gaan sit by hulle.

Twee vroue sit in ’n koets. Hildemara herken die vrou in die blou rok wat die oggend met haar gepraat het. Hulle gee bokse vir Mamma en Pappa. Pappa bring twee van hulle saam met hom tent toe terwyl Mamma met die dames praat. Toe Mamma inkom, is haar oë blink van die trane. Hildemara leun vooroor en snuif. Iets ruik heerlik. Toe sy weer uitkyk, waai die vrou vir haar. Marta waai terug.

“Wat het hulle vir ons gebring, Mamma?” Bernhard gaan sit op sy knieë toe Mamma die eerste boks oopmaak.

“Maak die flap toe, Hildemara,” sê Mamma skor. “Jy laat die koue inkom.”

Pappa haal ’n oondskottel versigtig uit en maak die deksel oop. Hy lyk weer gelukkig. “Kyk net hoe die Here voorsien. ’n Gestopte kalkoen en gebraaide patats.”

“Dis daardie vroue wat voorsien het,” sê Mamma saaklik.

“Dis God wat in mense se harte werk. Kyk net na hierdie feesmaal, kinders.”

Mamma haal ’n fles bosbessiesous uit, twee blikke koekies, twee varsgebakte brode, ’n dosyn eiers, twee flesse tuisgemaakte konfyt en ’n paar bottels melk. Sy draai snuiwend weg en blaas haar neus.

“Wat is in die sak, Pappa?”

“Ek weet nie. Ons sal seker moet kyk.” Pappa maak dit oop en bring die pragtige pop met die blou oë en blonde hare te voorskyn. “Dit lyk net soos jy, Clotilde.”

“Myne! Myne!” Clotilde klap hande en steek haar arms uit. Hildemara sien teleurgesteld hoe Pappa die pop vir haar klein sussie gee. Sy byt op haar lip, maar sê nie vir Pappa sy weet die pop was vir haar bedoel nie. Sy kyk na Clotilde wat dit styf teen haar hart vashou en weet dat die pop nou nooit hare sal wees nie. Hildemara sit op haar hakke en knip haar oë teen die trane. Toe sy weer opkyk, sien sy Mamma kyk vir haar. Mamma het haar met die vrou sien praat, en Mamma het gesien hoe sy na die pop kyk.

“Wil jy iets sê, Hildemara?”

Hildemara kyk weer na die pop en terug na Mamma.

“Jy beter nou begin leer om vir jouself op te staan.”

“Wat’s fout?” Pappa kyk na Mamma en dan weer na Hildemara.

Mamma kyk nog steeds na haar. “Is daar iets fout?”

Hildemara kyk na haar suster wat doodgelukkig met die pop sit en

speel. Sy weet as sy sê dat dit vir haar bedoel was, sal Clotilde huil en skree. As sy 'n bietjie wag, sal Clotilde dalk moeg word vir die pop en kan sy met haar speel.

"Wat van my, Pappa?" kom dit van Bernhard. "Is daar iets vir my?"

"Kom ons kyk." Pappa steek sy hand in die sak en haal 'n houtvliegtuigie uit. Bernhard neem dit en begin dit dadelik bo sy kop rondswaai terwyl Pappa in die sak rondvis. "Hier is nog iets." Hy haal 'n lappop uit met 'n eenvoudige blou en wit Switserse kolletjiesrok, hare van bruin garing en groot, bruin knope-oë. "En hierdie een is vir jou, Hildemara." Pappa gee dit vir haar.

Bernhard sien dit. "Hildie het van die ander een gehou, Mamma. Sy het dit in die winkel gesien. Sy het met daardie tannie gepraat – "

"Wel, dan moes sy so gesê het. Nou kry sy maar wat sy kry."

Pappa kyk na Mamma. "Hoekom het jy my nie gesê nie?"

"Sy moet leer om vir haarself te praat!"

"Sy's 'n klein dogtertjie."

"Sy's amper vyf! Clotilde is net drie en sukkel nie om vir 'n mens te sê wat sy wil hê nie."

"Marta." Pappa se stem is sag vermanend.

Bernhard kom tussenbeide. "Daar's nog iets in die sak, Pappa."

Die dierbare vroue het van niemand vergeet nie. Pappa kry 'n paar werkshandskoene en Mamma 'n pragtige gehekelde wit sjaal.

Pappa bid en sny die kalkoen, en Mamma skep vir hulle. Toe hulle almal klaar geëet het, speel Bernhard weer met sy vliegtuigie en Clotilde met haar pop.

Daar is 'n ongemaklike krieweling in Hildemara terwyl sy haar sussie met die blonde blouoogpop sien speel. Toe sy sien dat Mamma na haar kyk, voel Hildie hoe haar wange skaamrooi word. Sy kyk dadelik af.

Mamma trek die nuwe sjaal styf om haar skouers en gaan uit. Pappa sit sy hand op Hildie se kop. "Ek's jammer, *Liebling*." Hy staan op en volg Mamma.

Hildemara kan haar ouers in gedempte stemme hoor praat. Mamma klink geïrriteerd. Pappa praat Duits. Hildemara weet dat hulle oor haar praat en dit laat haar net nog slegter voel.

Sy sit die pop op haar knieë en kyk weer daarna. Sy dink aan die vrou in blou wat die bokse gebring het. Dalk het sy die lappop gemaak. Dit maak dit spesiaal. Hildemara raak weer aan die blink knope-oë en volg die pienk garingglimlag met haar vinger. "Ek is lief vir jou, maak nie saak hoe jy lyk nie." Sy druk haar vas en gaan lê op

haar mat en trek die kombers oor haar skouers.

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Mamma staan elke oggend op as dit nog donker is, maak vuur en kry Pappa se ontbyt gereed. Hildemara word altyd wakker van hulle gedempte stemme. Sy voel rustiger wanneer hulle met mekaar praat. Wanneer Mamma skree, voel dit vir Hildemara of sy naar word.

“Engels, Niclas. Jy kan nie aanhoudend op jou Duits terugval nie. Hulle gaan wonder of jy die *Kaiser* gesteun het.”

“Meneer Musashi leer my om bome en druiwe te snoei. Meneer Pimentel het my van die grond geleer.”

“En wat help dit alles as jy nie jou eie plek het nie; dis seker wat jy eintlik wil sê?”

“Marta ... ”

“Nie nou al nie. Ek’s nie bereid om alles te waag nie.”

Mamma pak vir Pappa kaas, brood en twee appels in voordat hy gaan werk. Mamma eet nooit voordat Pappa geloop het nie, en meestal kan sy haar ontbyt nie binnehou nie. “Is Mamma siek?”

“Dit sal oor ’n maand of twee oor wees.” Sy vee met die agterkant van haar hand oor haar voorkop. “En moenie vir Pappa daarvan sê nie. Hy sal in elk geval binnekort weet.”

Mamma voel gewoonlik beter teen middagete, maar sy het geen geduld met Bernhard of Clotilde nie, en nog minder met Hildemara. Almal doen hulle bes om uit haar pad te bly. Mamma stuur Bernhard om water te gaan haal en beveel Hildemara om die slaapsakke op te vou wat sy van ou komberse gemaak het. Clotilde speel met die pop. Bernhard gaan hengel in die leisloot, maar vang nooit iets nie, en Hildemara skil aartappels terwyl Mamma klere in ’n groot wasbalie was en dit aan ’n tou ophang wat sy tussen twee bome gespan het.

Toe Pappa vuil en stowwerig by die huis aankom, het sy warm water en seep gereed sodat hy kan was. Hildemara bly naby genoeg om te hoor. “Ek neem die kinders môre skool toe om hulle te registreer. Dit sal vir hulle beter wees as hulle ’n permanente adres het.”

“Ja. En as jy jou beursie oopmaak, sal ons ’n permanente adres hê.”

“Kry ’n plek om te deelboer. Wanneer jy aan my bewys dat jy genoeg weet om ’n bestaan uit boerdery te maak, sal ek jou gee wat jy nodig het.”

"Ek kan die geld vir my vat, Marta. Toe ons getrou het, het dit wat joune is myne geword."

Sy verstyf. "Ons is nou in Amerika, nie Duitsland nie. Wat myne is, bly myne, tensy ek anders besluit. Moenie dink jy kan my hiet en gebied en dat ek jou slaaf gaan wees nie!"

Pappa lyk hartseer, nie kwaad nie. "Ek's nie jou pa nie."

Mamma krimp ineen. "Nee. Jy is nie. Maar jy het een keer tevore geweier om na my te luister en kyk wat het gebeur."

Hy spoel die seep van sy nek af. "Moet jy aanhou om my daaraan te herinner?"

"Dis jy wat kies om te vergeet."

Hy gooi die handdoek neer. "Ek kies om weer te probeer!"

Sy tree vorentoe en steek haar ken uit. "En ek kies om te wag en kyk of dit die Here se wil of 'n man se grille is!" Sy loop terug na die wasbalie toe.

"Jy word by die dag net buieriger!"

Mamma lig haar kop, haar oë vol trane. "Dalk het dit iets te doen met die feit dat ons dwarsoor die kontinent moes trek, net om in hierdie godverlate dorp te kom sit. Dalk het dit te doen met die winter en die koue en 'n tent vir 'n huis en nog 'n baba wat op pad is!" Sy vis sy hemp uit die water en gooi dit in die grond. "Was jou eie klere!" Sy loop na die leisloot toe en gaan sit met haar rug na hom.

Toe Pappa klaar gewas het, loop hy uit en gaan sit by haar. Hy sit sy arm om haar skouers en trek haar teen hom vas.

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Hulle trek hulle beste klere aan voordat Mamma hulle die volgende dag dorp toe wat. "Moenie deur die water loop nie en probeer om nie vuil te word nie!" Bernhard hardloop vooruit, maar Clotilde en Hildemara loop soos klein eendjies agter hulle ma aan. Hulle loop verby geurige wilgerbome, af in Mainstraat met sy baie geboue, oor die hoofpad en verby 'n klein algemene handelaar tot by 'n klein wit geboutjie met 'n kloktoring en 'n rooi dak.

Mamma trek haar vingers deur Bernhard se dik, blonde pennetjies-hare en vee oor Hildemara se geruite katoenrok. Sy tel Clotilde op 'n bankie. "Sit net hier, al drie van julle, en moenie beweeg nie." Sy kyk streng na Bernhard. "As jy wegloop, sal ek Pappa se gordel gaan haal wanneer ons by die huis kom, Bernhard." Sy het nie een van hulle al

ooit met die gordel bygekom nie, maar haar oë verklap dat sy ernstig is.

Bernhard is kriewelrig. Hy kyk verlangend na die wipplank en swaaie, die klimraam en sandput. Clotilde sit vorentoe en swaai haar bene. Hildemara sit stil, hande gevou en bid dat sy nie by die skool toegelaat sal word nie, dat sy by Mamma by die huis kan bly.

Mamma kom terug. “Die Kersvakansie gaan na Nuwejaarsdag verby wees. Bernard, jy en Hildemara begin volgende Maandag met skool.”

Hildemara se lip begin bewe.

Clotilde stoot haar onderlip uit. “Ek wil ook gaan!”

“Jy sal moet wag. Jy moet vyf wees om skool toe te gaan.”

“Ek’s nog nie vyf nie, Mamma,” protesteer Hildemara.

“Jy sal voor die einde van Januarie vyf wees. Dis naby genoeg.”

## Chapter 17

**1922**

Hildemara couldn't sleep the night before school. She pretended to be asleep when Mama got up and made Papa's breakfast. She roused Bernhard first and pulled the covers back from Hildemara's shoulders. "I know you're awake. Get up and get dressed."

When Mama gave her a bowl of *Müsli*, Hildemara couldn't eat it. Her stomach felt like something had gotten in and kept fluttering as it tried to get out. She looked up at Mama. "I'm sick. I can't go to school."

"You're not sick, and you are going."

"She is a little pale." Papa put his palm against Hildie's forehead. Hildie hoped he would say she had a fever. "She feels cool."

"She's scared, that's all. As soon as she gets there, she'll find she doesn't need to be." Mama jerked her head. "If you don't eat something, everyone in your class is going to hear your stomach growling by ten in the morning." Hildemara looked at Clotilde, still bundled in a sleeping bag.

Papa looked at Hildemara. "I can walk them to school."

"No. They need to learn to stand on their own. They'll be fine walking by themselves."

Papa ruffled Bernhard's slicked-back hair. While Mama ran a comb through it again, Papa kissed Hildemara. "You will meet lots of other little girls your age." He patted her cheek. When he went out, Mama went with him. When Mama ducked back inside the tent, she didn't look at Hildemara. She picked up the small buckets with their lunch and told them it was time to be off. She grabbed Bernhard by the shoulder before he went out. "You walk with your sister. You keep an eye on her."

They hadn't gone a quarter mile when Bernhard kicked the dust angrily. "Come on, Hildie! Stop dragging your feet!" When she didn't walk much faster, he started to run. She cried out, but he shouted back at her that she'd have to catch up or walk alone.

Hildemara ran as fast as she could, but she knew she wouldn't be able to catch him. A stitch in her side made her slow down. She cried out again, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He looked back over his shoulder. Stopping, he put his hands on his hips and waited until she caught up with him. "You'd better stop crying now or they'll all call you a crybaby." He stayed beside her the

rest of the way.

Children played in the yard. Some stopped to stare when Bernhard and Hildemara came near. Bernhard pushed the gate open. When children came over, Bernhard did all the talking. Hildemara stood beside him, looking from one face to the other, her throat dry. One of the boys looked at her. “Is your sister dumb or something?”

Bernhard’s face turned red. “She’s not dumb.”

When the bell rang, everyone lined up and filed into the building. A slender, dark-haired woman in a navy blue skirt, long-sleeved white blouse, and dark blue knitted sweater told Hildemara to share a desk with Elizabeth Kenney, the pretty girl who had worn the red and green satin dress and shiny black shoes the night of the Christmas pageant. She wore a pretty green dress today. A matching green bow tied her two long, red pigtails back. Elizabeth smiled brightly. Hildemara tried to smile back.

Bernhard made friends right away. A group of boys surrounded him on the playground. Tony Reboli stepped into the circle. “Let’s play a game.” He pushed Bernhard. Laughing, Bernhard pushed back. Tony put more force behind his next push. Bernhard shoved so hard Tony went down. Bernhard stepped forward and extended his hand. Tony allowed himself to be pulled up. Dusting himself off, he suggested they have a race. Tony took off, Tom Hughes, Eddie Rinckel, and Wallie Engles chasing after him. Bernhard caught up easily and passed by Tony, reaching the end of the playground first.

Sitting on a bench under a big elm, Hildemara watched her brother chum around with his new friends. He could run faster, jump higher, and play harder than any boy in school. By the end of the day, only the girls called him Bernhard. All the boys called him Bernie. By the end of the week, everyone wanted to be his best friend. Even the girls followed him around, giggling and whispering, wanting his attention. It amused Hildemara to see how embarrassed that made her older brother.

After two weeks, Hildie still hadn’t made one friend. No one teased her; Bernie made certain of that. But no one paid her any attention. She became Little Sis because that’s what Bernie called her and no one remembered her name. Every recess, while the others played, she sat on a bench by herself and watched. She didn’t know how to join in, and the mere thought of approaching someone and asking permission made her feel sick to her stomach. Only the teacher noticed her.

Mrs. Ransom kept a chart on the wall and put up gold and silver stars, or blue and red dots. Every morning, Hildie ran to the girls' bathroom first thing to wash. It did no good. Following the Pledge of Allegiance and singing "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," which Hildemara confused with "God Save the King," Mrs. Ransom checked each child for properly combed hair, washed hands and face, clean nails, and polished shoes. Not once did Hildemara pass inspection.

Once, Mrs. Ransom went so far as to part her hair in a dozen places searching for lice. While the children twittered with laughter, Hildemara sat red-faced and sick with humiliation. "Well, at least you don't have lice. But you're not clean enough to earn even a red dot. You might earn a silver star if you bothered to polish your shoes."

When Hildemara said she needed polish for her shoes, Mama turned around and put her hands on her hips. "Polish? With all the sand and dust you walk through to get to school? We're not wasting money on polish!"

Hildemara dampened the hem of her dress to clean her shoes, but then Mrs. Ransom said her dress looked unwashed.

"Let me see your hands, Hildemara Waltert. Still chewing your nails, too. It's a disgusting habit. You'll get worms." The children around Hildie twittered. "Hold up your arms. Don't put them down until I tell you." Hildemara kept her hands in the air, her face burning with shame as Mrs. Ransom pointed. "Look at this, children. When you wash your hands, wash your arms as well. I don't want to see rivulets of dirt." She shook her head at Hildemara. "You can put your arms down now. Next time, don't just splash a little water on yourself in the girls' bathroom and call it a bath!"

"The Walterts live in a tent down by the irrigation ditch, Mrs. Ransom."

"I know where they live, Elizabeth, and it's no excuse for being filthy. If she bothered to use a little soap with the water, she might earn a silver star." Mrs. Ransom moved on to the next child. Betty Jane Marrow received a gold star every day.

Hot tears burned and Hildemara struggled to keep them back. She bit her lower lip and kept her hands clenched in her lap. She could feel Elizabeth Kenney looking at her, but wouldn't look back. A boy behind them leaned forward and yanked hard on Hildemara's hair. Elizabeth swung around. "Stop it!"

Mrs. Ransom turned and pinned Hildemara with her eyes. "Go sit on the stool in the corner."

Elizabeth gasped. “She didn’t do anything!”

“All right. That’s enough. Let’s get to work.”

When recess came, Hildemara went out to her bench. Elizabeth Kenney left her friends and approached her. “May I sit with you, Hildemara?”

Hildemara shrugged, torn between resentment and admiration. Elizabeth had a whole row of gold stars on the class chart. The only one who had more was Betty Jane Marrow. Elizabeth looked plump and pretty. No one told her she looked skinny as a rail and pale as a ghost.

“I live on Elm Street. It’s not far. Just across the road and down a few blocks. You walked by my house once. I saw you through the window. My house is just a few doors down from the library. Do you know where that is? You can come to my house before school, if you like. We have hot water and . . .”

Hildemara’s face flamed. “I wash every morning. I’m clean before I come to school.”

“It’s a long walk from where you live. I’d be covered with dust and dirt, too, if I had to walk to school every day.”

“How do you know where we live? Did Bernie tell you?”

“My mother brought Christmas dinner to your family. She brought you and your sister dolls.”

“Did she make the rag doll?”

“No. It was from the church rummage box.” Elizabeth’s friends called for her to come back. Elizabeth said she’d come in a minute. “My mother says Mrs. Ransom treats you badly because her brother got killed in the war. Your father is German, isn’t he? That makes you German, too.” When her friends called again, Elizabeth stood. “I guess I’d better go. Would you like to play with us, Hildemara?”

“Elizabeth!”

Hildemara looked at the other girls. They called for Elizabeth, not her. Did they think of her in the same way Mrs. Ransom did? Throat tight, Hildie shook her head. When Elizabeth walked away, Hildie watched Bernie playing marbles with his friends on the other side of the playground. Why didn’t anyone care that he was German? Everyone liked her brother. Mrs. Ransom would probably like him, too, if he were one of her students.

Mama made her and Bernie do homework every afternoon when they got home. “You have to do it now before it’s too dark to see. The sooner you get it done, the sooner you can go out to play. Now, read it

again."

Bernie protested.

"You'll never get anywhere in the world if you can't read better than that, Bernhard. Read it again."

After two months, Mrs. Ransom pinned a note to Hildemara's sweater. Mama unpinned it and read it. "She says you're a slow reader. You're not a slow reader. What is this note all about? She thinks you're stupid. No child of mine is stupid! Bring your book home tomorrow."

When school ended the next day, Hildemara took a reading book from the shelf.

"Where do you think you're going with that book?" Mrs. Ransom blocked the doorway.

"Mama wants me to bring it home."

"Stealing! That's what you're about!"

"No!" Blubbering, Hildemara tried to explain.

"I don't care what your mother wants, Hildemara." She snatched the book back. "Tell her to take you to the library. These books are expensive and paid for by *American* taxpayers. You don't have a right to it."

When Hildemara came inside the tent without the book, Mama wanted to know why. "Mrs. Ransom wouldn't let me have it. She said you should take me to the library."

Mama's eyes went hot, but she calmed down by the end of dinner. "We'll go to the library on Saturday." She put her fingers beneath Hildemara's chin and made her look up. "Try to make a friend. One friend can make all the difference as to whether you will be happy or miserable with the world. Rosie Gilgan is my friend and has been since the first day of school. She comes from a wealthy family who owns a hotel. I was a tailor's daughter. She lived in a large house. Our family lived upstairs from the shop. I could share my thoughts and feelings with Rosie and never fear she would tell tales or make fun of me. Rosie was always kind, a true Christian, and I knew I could trust her. You find someone like that, Hildemara Rose, and you will be a much happier girl than you are right now."

"Did you name me after your friend, Mama?"

"Yes. I did. I hope you'll grow up to have her fine qualities."

Hildemara imagined Rosie Gilgan had been fearless like Mama and popular like Elizabeth Kenney, with no worries about how others might treat her. Hildemara cried herself to sleep. She wished she

could get sick like she had on the train. Maybe then Mama would let her stay home from school. Maybe then she would never have to go back and face Mrs. Ransom.

No amount of crying and begging changed Mama's mind, even on Saturday, when Mama found out she couldn't borrow books until the family had a permanent address.

* * *

Papa leaned close to the lamp and translated a story from his German Bible every evening. One evening he would pick from the Old Testament, the next from the New. Bernie liked to hear about warriors like Gideon and David and Goliath or the prophet Elijah calling down fire on the altar and then killing all the priests of Baal. Clotilde didn't care what Papa read. She crawled into his lap and fell asleep within minutes.

Hildemara liked the stories of Ruth and Esther, but tonight she didn't want to get into a squabble with her brother and sister after being picked on all day by Mrs. Ransom. She had heard Mama and Papa arguing earlier, and she didn't want to add fuel to Mama's temper by complaining about anything.

"No warriors or war stories tonight, Bernhard." Papa tweaked Clotilde's nose. "And no love stories. You're going to hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount."

Papa read for a long time. Bernie usually sat cross-legged, eager to hear. Tonight, he flopped on his cot, his hands behind his head, half-dozing. When Clotilde fell asleep, Mama tucked her into her blanket sack. Hildemara poked the needle through the sampler Mama gave her. No matter how hard she tried, she made a mess of the stitches. Mama took it and plucked at the knotted thread. She handed it back. "Do it again." Hildie hung her head, wanting to cry. Even Mama didn't approve of her efforts to do things right.

Papa kept reading.

Hildemara didn't understand most of it. What did it mean to be salt and light? Why would someone hide a lantern under a basket? Did they want to start a fire? What did adultery mean? When he started reading about enemies, Hildemara took slower, more careful stitches. *"Love your enemies,"* Jesus said. Did that mean she had to love Mrs. Ransom? Mrs. Ransom hated her. Surely that made her an enemy. *"Pray for those who persecute you,"* Jesus said. "What does *persecute* mean?"

Mama stabbed a needle through one of Papa's work shirts. "It's

when someone treats you cruelly, when they spitefully use you."

Papa left the Bible open in his lap. "Jesus was treated cruelly, Hildemara. When He was nailed to the cross, He prayed for the people who put Him there. He asked God to forgive them because they didn't know what they were doing."

"Are we supposed to do that?"

Mama gave Papa an angry glance. "No one can be as perfect as Jesus."

Papa didn't look at her, but spoke to Hildemara instead. "God says if you love only those who love you, then you're no better than those who are cruel to you. If you are kind only to friends, you are no different than your enemy."

Mama tied a knot and snipped it. "That doesn't mean you let people step all over you. You have to stand up—"

"Marta." Papa's quiet voice held a note of warning that made Mama press her lips together. Papa put his hand on Hildemara's head. "It takes someone very special to love an enemy and pray for someone who is unkind."

"She's not Jesus, Niclas." Mama tossed Papa's shirt onto his bed. "And if she was, she'd end up like Him, too. Nailed to a cross!" She went outside the tent, arms crossed against the cold night air.

Papa closed the Bible. "Time for bed."

Lying on her cot, Hildemara heard Mama and Papa talking in low voices outside the tent wall.

"One of us should go and tell that—"

"It'd only make things worse, and you know it."

"She's having a hard enough time without you telling her she has to put up with people walking all over her. She has to learn to stand up for herself."

"There are different ways of standing." Papa's voice lowered even more.

Hildemara muffled her crying in her blanket. She didn't want Mama and Papa arguing about her. She prayed Mrs. Ransom would stop persecuting her. She prayed Mrs. Ransom would be nice tomorrow. She thought about what Elizabeth Kenney had told her about Mrs. Ransom's brother. Hildemara knew how sad she would be if anything bad happened to Bernie. Just thinking about Bernie dying made Hildemara feel even worse. Hildemara hadn't done anything to deserve Mrs. Ransom's hatred. Maybe Mrs. Ransom was just like those people who killed Jesus. Maybe Mrs. Ransom didn't know what she

was doing, either.

All the way to school the next morning, Hildemara prayed quietly. Bernie told her to stop mumbling. “If you start whispering to yourself, people are gonna think you’re crazy!”

The rest of the way to school, Hildemara thought her prayers instead of saying them aloud. When Mrs. Ransom led the children into the classroom, Hildie thought a prayer for her. *Jesus, forgive Mrs. Ransom for being so mean to me. She doesn’t know what she’s doing.*

The prayer didn’t change anything. In fact, everything got a whole lot worse. When the hygienic inspection was over, Mrs. Ransom grabbed Hildemara by the ear and dragged her from her seat. “Come up here, Hildemara Waltert, and let the other children have a good look at you!”

Heart thumping, Hildemara tried not to cry. Mrs. Ransom let go of her ear long enough to grab her shoulders and spin her around to face the class. “Hold up your hands, Hildemara. Show these children what I have to look at every morning.” Hildemara closed her eyes tightly, wishing she could become invisible. Mrs. Ransom slapped the back of her head. “Do what I tell you!” Trembling, face on fire, Hildemara held up her hands. “Look, children! Have you ever seen such disgusting fingernails? She’s chewed them down to the quick.”

For once, no one laughed or even twittered.

“Go to your seat, Hildemara Waltert.”

When Papa finished reading the Bible that evening, Hildemara asked if he had fought in the war. He frowned. “Why do you ask such a question?”

“Mrs. Ransom’s brother died in the war.”

“I was in Canada when it started.”

Mama interrupted before he could go on reading the Bible. “Had your papa been in Germany, he might have been killed, too, Hildemara. Hundreds of thousands died: Frenchmen, Englishmen, Canadians, Americans, *and* Germans.”

Bernie asked who started it.

Papa closed the Bible. “It’s too complicated to explain, *Sohn*. One angry man shot a royal and two countries went to war. Then friends of those countries took sides, and soon the whole world was fighting.”

“Except Switzerland.” Mama went on sewing. “They were smart enough to stay out of it.”

Papa opened his Bible again. “Yes, but they made plenty of money on it.”

Hildemara couldn't make sense of it. "Did anybody you know die, Papa?"

"My father. My brothers."

Mama's eyes went wide. "This is the first I've heard of them."

Papa gave her a sad smile. "I wasn't hatched, Marta. I had a mother and father and brothers and sisters. My mother died when I was Hildemara's age. My sisters were much older and married. I don't know what happened to any of them. I've written letters." He shook his head, his eyes moist. "Only God knows what became of them."

When Hildemara got up the next morning, she asked Mama if there would be another war. "I don't know, Hildemara." She sounded angry and impatient. She finished braiding Hildemara's hair and turned her around. "Why all these questions about the war? The war is over!"

*Not for some people.* She didn't want to tell Mama what Mrs. Ransom did to her every day because Mama would get mad, and if Mama got mad, Mrs. Ransom would have all the more reason to be angry with Germans.

Hildemara felt sorry for Mrs. Ransom. She must be very sad to be so angry all the time. Hildemara prayed Mrs. Ransom would find another way to get over her brother's death, and not take it out on her.

Mama tipped Hildemara's chin. "Who told you Mrs. Ransom's brother was killed in the war?"

"Elizabeth Kenney."

"Well, it's no excuse. God says not to hold a grudge. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" When Mama's eyes grew moist, she stood abruptly and turned away. "Don't forget your lunch bucket. You'd better hurry, or Bernhard will be halfway to school before you catch up."

When Hildemara looked back, she saw Mama standing outside the tent, her arms wrapped around herself, watching. Hildemara ran down the road.

## Hoofstuk 17

## 1922

Die nag voordat hulle skool toe gaan, kan Hildemara nie slaap nie. Sy maak asof sy slaap toe Mamma opstaan en vir Pappa ontbyt maak. Sy maak eers vir Bernhard wakker en dan trek sy Hildemara se komberse af. "Ek weet jy's wakker. Staan op en trek aan."

Hildemara kan nie die bakkie *Müsli* eet wat Mamma vir haar gee nie. Dit voel asof daar iets in haar maag is wat aanhou rondfladder en probeer uitkom. Sy kyk op na Mamma. "Ek's siek. Ek kan nie skool toe gaan nie."

"Jy is nie siek nie, en jy sal gaan."

"Sy is 'n bietjie bleek." Pappa hou sy handpalm teen Hildie se voorkop. Hildie hoop hy sê dat sy 'n koors het. "Sy is nie warm nie."

"Sy's bang, dis al. Sodra sy daar kom, sal sy sien dat dit nie nodig is nie." Mamma maak 'n beweging met haar kop. "As jy niks eet nie, gaan die hele klas jou maag later vanoggend hoor skree." Hildemara kyk na Clotilde waar sy steeds in haar slaapsak toegewikkel is.

Pappa kyk na Hildemara. "Ek kan saam met hulle skool toe loop."

"Nee. Hulle moet leer om op hulle eie bene te staan. Dit sal hulle nie seermaak om self te loop nie."

Pappa krap Bernhard se teruggekamde hare deurmekaar. Terwyl Mamma dit weer kam, kom gee Pappa Hildemara 'n soen. "Jy gaan baie ander klein dogtertjies ontmoet wat net so oud soos jy is." Hy tik met sy vinger teen haar wang. Toe hy loop, gaan Mamma saam met hom buitentoe. Toe Mamma weer by die tent inbuk, kyk sy nie na Hildemara nie. Sy tel die klein kosblikke op en sê dat dit tyd is om te loop. Sy kry Bernhard aan die skouer beet voordat hy uitgaan. "Loop saam met jou sussie, Bernhard. Hou 'n ogie oor haar."

Hulle het nog nie ver geloop voordat Bernhard vies na die stof skop nie. "Kom nou, Hildie! Loop vinniger!" Toe sy nie veel vinniger loop nie, begin hy hardloop. Sy roep na hom, maar hy skree dat sy moet

byhou of alleen loop.

Hildemara hardloop op haar vinnigste, maar sy weet sy sal hom nie kan inhaal nie. ’n Steekpyn in haar sy laat haar loop. Sy roep weer en nou stroom die trane oor haar wange.

Hy kyk oor sy skouer, gaan staan en wag hande op die heupe totdat sy by hom is. “Jy beter ophou huil, anders gaan hulle jou ’n tjankbalie noem.” Hy loop die res van die pad saam met haar.

’n Klompie kinders speel voor die skoolgeboutjie. Party van hulle hou op en staar toe hulle Bernhard en Hildemara sien naderkom. Bernhard stoot die hek oop. Toe die kinders na hulle toe kom, doen Bernhard al die praatwerk. Hildemara staan langs hom en kyk na die gesigte om haar, haar keel droog. Een van die seuns kyk na haar. “Is jou sussie dom of iets?”

Bernhard se gesig word rooi. “Sy’s nie dom nie.”

Toe die klok lui, gaan staan almal in ’n ry voor die gebou en loop in. ’n Skraal donkerkopvrou in ’n vlootblou romp, wit langmoubloesie en donkerblou gebreide trui wys dat Hildemara langs Elizabeth Kenney moet gaan sit, die mooi dogtertjie wat die rooi-en-groen satynrok en die blink swart skoene die aand van die Kersspel gedra het. Vandag dra sy ’n mooi groen rok. Haar lang rooi hare is met ’n bypassende groen strik vasgemaak. Elizabeth glimlag breed. Hildemara probeer om terug te glimlag.

Bernhard maak dadelik vriende. ’n Groep seuns drom op die speelterrein om hom saam. Tony Reboli gaan staan in die kring. “Kom ons speel ’n speletjie.” Hy stamp Bernhard. Bernhard lag en stamp hom terug. Tony se volgende stamp is ’n bietjie harder. Bernhard stamp hom so hard terug dat Tony gaan sit. Bernhard staan nader en steek sy hand uit. Tony laat toe dat Bernhard hom optrek. Nadat hy homself afgestof het, stel hy voor dat hulle resies hardloop. Tony spring weg, Tom Hughes, Eddie Rinckel en Wallie Engles agterna. Nadat Bernhard hulle maklik ingehaal het, steek hy Tony verby en is hy eerste aan die oorkant van die speelterrein.

Van waar sy op ’n bankie onder ’n groot olmboom sit, kyk Hildemara hoe haar broer met sy nuwe vriende speel. Hy kan vinniger hardloop, hoër spring en wilder speel as enige van die ander skoolseuns. Teen die einde van die dag is dit net die meisies wat hom Bernhard noem. Al die seuns noem hom Bernie. Teen die einde van die week wil almal sy maatjie wees. Selfs die dogtertjies tou agter hom aan. Hulle giggel en fluister en wil hê hy moet hulle raaksien. Dit amuseer Hildemara om te sien hoe verleë dit haar boetie maak.

Ná twee weke het Hildemara nog glad nie ’n maatjie nie. Niemand terg haar nie; Bernie het seker gemaak daarvan. Maar niemand steur hulle aan haar nie. Sy word Kleinsus, want dis wat Bernie haar noem en niemand onthou haar naam nie. Sy sit pouses alleen op ’n bankie en kyk hoe die ander kinders speel. Sy weet nie hoe om saam te speel nie, en die idee om na iemand toe te loop en toestemming te vra, laat haar naar voel. Die onderwyseres is die enigste een wat haar opmerk.

Daar is ’n plakkaat teen die muur en mevrou Ransom plak goue en silwer sterre, of blou en rooi kolle daarop. Hildemara hardloop elke oggend voor skool na die meisies se kleedkamer toe om te was. Dit help nie. Nadat hulle die nasionale gelofte opgesê en die volkslied gesing het, kyk mevrou Ransom of al die kinders se hare gekam is, hulle hande en gesigte gewas is, of hulle naels skoon en skoene gepolitoer is. Hildemara slaag nie ’n enkele inspeksie nie.

Een maal gaan mevrou Ransom sover om haar hare deur te gaan op soek na luise. Terwyl die ander kinders onderlangs giggel, sit Hildemara bloedrooi en naar van vernedering. “Nou ja, ten minste het jy nie luise nie. Maar jy is nie eens skoon genoeg vir ’n rooi kol nie. Jy kan selfs ’n silwer ster verdien as jy die moeite doen om jou skoene blink te vryf.”

Toe Hildemara vir Mamma sê dat sy politoer vir haar skoene nodig het, draai sy om en plant haar hande op haar heupe. “Politoer? Met al die sand en stof op pad skool toe? Ons gaan nie geld op politoer mors nie!”

Toe Hildemara haar roksoom effens natmaak om haar skoene skoon te maak, sê mevrou Ransom dat haar rok ongewas lyk.

“Wys my jou hande, Hildemara Waltert. Ek sien jy het nog nie opgehou om jou naels te kou nie. Dit is ’n vieslike gewoonte. Jy sal wurms kry.” Die kinders rondom Hildemara lag. “Tel jou arms op. Moet hulle nie laat sak voordat ek vir jou sê nie.” Hildemara hou haar hande in die lug, haar gesig brandend van skaamte toe mevrou Ransom wys: “Kyk hierna, kinders. Wanneer julle hande was, moet julle ook julle arms was. Ek wil nie sulke merke sien nie.” Sy kyk kopskuddend na Hildemara. “Jy kan jou arms nou laat sak. Jy kan nie net ’n bietjie water in die meisies kleedkamer oor jouself spat en dit ’n bad noem nie!”

“Die Walterts bly in ’n tent langs die leisloot, mevrou Ransom.”

“Ek weet waar hulle bly, Elizabeth, en dis nie ’n verskoning om vuil te wees nie. As sy net die moeite doen om ’n bietjie seep saam met die water te gebruik, kan sy dalk selfs ’n silwer ster verdien.” Mevrou

Ransom wend haar na die volgende kind. Betty Jane Marrow kry elke dag ’n goue ster.

Hildemara baklei teen haar warm trane. Sy byt haar onderlip vas en hou haar hande op haar skoot gevou. Sy kan Elizabeth Kenney na haar voel kyk, maar kyk nie terug nie. ’n Seun agter hulle leun vooroor en gee Hildemara se hare ’n harde pluk. Elizabeth swaai om. “Hou op!”

Mevrou Ransom draai om en pen Hildemara vas met haar oë. “Gaan sit op die stoel in die hoek.”

Elizabeth snak na haar asem. “Sy het niks gedoen nie!”

“Nou goed. Dis genoeg. Ons het baie werk om te doen.”

Pouse loop Hildemara na haar bankie toe. Elizabeth Kenney los haar maats en kom na haar toe. “Kan ek by jou sit, Hildemara?”

Hildemara trek haar skouers op, verskeur tussen afkeer en bewondering. Elizabeth het ’n hele ry goue sterre. Die enigste een wat meer het, is Betty Jane Marrow. Elizabeth is sag en mooi. Niemand sê vir haar dat sy so maer soos ’n paal en so bleek soos ’n spook is nie.

“Ek bly in Olmstraat. Dis nie ver nie. Net ’n paar blokke van hier af. Julle het verby ons huis geloop. Ek het jou deur die venster gesien. Ons bly net ’n paar huise van die biblioteek af. Weet jy waar dit is? As jy wil, kan jy voor skool gou na ons huis toe kom. Ons het warm water en ... ”

Hildemara se gesig word warm. “Ek was elke oggend. Ek’s skoon voordat ek skool toe kom.”

“Dis ’n hele ent se loop van waar julle bly. Ek sou ook vol stof gewees het as ek elke dag moes skool toe loop.”

“Hoe weet jy waar ons bly? Het Bernie vir jou gesê?”

“My ma het Kersfees vir julle kos gebring. Sy het vir jou en jou sussie poppe gegee.”

“Het sy die lappop gemaak?”

“Nee. Dit kom uit die kerk se rommelkas.” Elizabeth se vriendinne roep dat sy moet kom. Elizabeth sê dat hulle moet wag. “My ma sê mevrou Ransom is lelik met jou omdat haar broer in die oorlog dood is. Jou pa is mos Duits, nè? Dit maak jou ook Duits.” Toe haar maatjies weer roep, staan Elizabeth op. “Ek moet seker maar gaan. Wil jy nie saam met ons kom speel nie, Hildemara?”

“Elizabeth!”

Hildemara kyk na die ander dogtertjies. Hulle roep vir Elizabeth, nie vir haar nie. Sien hulle haar ook soos wat mevrou Ransom haar sien? Hildie se keel is stram en sy skud net haar kop. Toe Elizabeth wegloop, kyk Hildie hoe Bernie saam met sy maatjies aan die oorkant

van die speelterrein met albasters speel. Hoekom maak dit vir niemand saak dat hy Duits is nie? Almal hou van haar boetie. Mevrou Ransom sou tien teen een ook van hom gehou het as hy in haar klas was.

Mamma laat hulle elke middag huiswerk doen wanneer hulle by die huis kom. “Julle moet dit nou doen voordat dit te donker is om te sien. Hoe gouer julle dit doen, hoe gouer kan julle buite gaan speel. Toe, lees weer.”

Bernie protesteer.

“Jy gaan nooit iewers in die wêreld kom as jy nie beter kan lees nie, Bernhard. Lees weer vir my.”

Twee maande later steek mevrou Ransom ’n briefie aan Hildemara se trui vas. Mamma haal dit af en lees. “Sy sê jy is ’n stadige leser. Jy is nie ’n stadige leser nie. Wat is die storie met hierdie briefie? Sy dink jy is dom. Nie een van my kinders is dom nie! Bring jou boek huis toe.”

Toe die skool die volgende middag uitkom, gaan haal Hildemara ’n leesboek uit die rak.

“Waar dink jy gaan jy met daardie boek?” Mevrou Ransom gaan staan in die deur sodat sy nie kan uitgaan nie.

“Mamma wil hê ek moet dit huis toe neem.”

“Jy is besig om te steel en ek het jou gevang!”

“Nee!” Hildemara probeer stotterend verduidelik.

“Ek gee nie om wat jou ma wil hê nie, Hildemara.” Sy gryp die boek uit haar hande. “Sê sy moet jou biblioteek toe neem. Hierdie boeke is baie duur en is met die *Amerikaanse* belastingbetalers se geld gekoop. Jy het geen reg daarop nie.”

Toe Hildemara sonder die boek by die tent aankom, wil Mamma weet hoekom. “Mevrou Ransom het gesê ek mag dit nie huis toe bring nie. Sy sê Mamma moet my biblioteek toe vat.”

Sy kan die woede in Mamma se oë sien, maar teen die tyd dat hulle eet, het sy afgekoel. “Ek sal julle Saterdag biblioteek toe vat.” Sy plaas haar vingers onder Hildemara se ken sodat sy moet opkyk. “Probeer om ’n maatjie te maak. Een maatjie kan maak dat jy ’n gelukkige dogtertjie is. Rosie Gilgan was al van my eerste skooldag my vriendin. Sy kom uit ’n ryk familie wat ’n hotel besit. Ek was ’n kleremaker se dogter. Sy het in ’n groot huis gebly. Ons gesin het bo die winkel gebly. Ek kon my gedagtes en gevoelens met Rosie deel sonder om bang te wees dat sy stories sou aandra of my sou spot. Rosie was nog altyd goedhartig, ’n opregte Christen en ek het geweet ek kon haar

vertrou. As jy so iemand kry, Hildemara Rose, sal jy 'n baie gelukkiger dogtertjie wees as wat jy nou is."

"Het Mamma my na Mamma se vriendin vernoem?"

"Ja, ek het. Ek hoop jy sal eendag al haar mooi eienskappe hê."

Hildemara is seker dat Rosie Gilgan so vreesloos soos Mamma en so mooi soos Elizabeth Kenney was, sonder om bekommerd te wees hoe die ander kinders haar gaan behandel. Hildemara huil haarself aan die slaap. Sy wens sy was weer siek soos op die trein. Dalk sal Mamma haar dan by die huis laat bly. Dalk sal sy nie weer hoef terug te gaan en mevrou Ransom te sien nie.

Maar maak nie saak hoe sy huil en smeek nie, niks kan Mamma van plan laat verander nie, nie eens Saterdag toe Mamma uitvind dat sy nie boeke mag uitneem voordat die gesin 'n permanente adres het nie.

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Pappa sit elke aand digby die lamp en vertaal vir hulle 'n verhaal uit sy Duitse Bybel. Die een aand kies hy iets uit die Ou Testament, die volgende iets uit die Nuwe. Bernie luister graag na stories van krygers soos Gideon en Dawid en Goliat en die profeet Elia wat die altaar aan die brand gebid het en al die Baälpriesters doodgemaak het. Clotilde gee nie om wat Pappa lees nie. Sy klim op sy skoot en is binne 'n paar minute aan die slaap.

Hildemara hou van die stories van Rut en Ester, maar vanaand wil sy nie met haar boetie stry nadat mevrou Ransom die hele dag op haar gepik het nie. Sy het Mamma en Pappa vroeër hoor stry en sy wil Mamma nie verder omkrap deur oor enigiets te kla nie.

"Vanaand is daar nie oorlogstories nie, Bernhard." Pappa gee Clotilde se neus 'n speelse knypie. "Ook nie liefdesverhale nie. Ek gaan Jesus se Bergrede vir julle lees."

Pappa lees 'n lang ruk. Bernie sit gewoonlik kruisbeen, gretig om te luister. Vanaand val hy op sy bed neer, sy hande agter sy kop en dit lyk of hy insluimer. Toe Clotilde aan die slaap raak, gaan sit Mamma haar in haar kombersslaapsak. Hildemara steek die naald deur die stukkie afvalmateriaal wat Mamma vir haar gegee het. Maak nie saak hoe hard sy probeer nie, sy maak 'n gemors van die steke. Mamma neem dit en pluk aan die gekoekte garing. Sy gee dit terug. "Doen dit weer." Hildie sit kop onderstebo, na aan trane. Selfs Mamma vind fout met haar pogings om iets reg te doen.

Pappa hou aan met lees.

Hildemara verstaan nie veel nie. Wat beteken dit om sout en lig te wees? Hoekom sou iemand 'n lamp onder 'n emmer wegsteek? Wil hulle hê daar moet 'n brand begin? Wat beteken egbreek? Toe hy van vyande begin lees, maak Hildemara stadiger, versigtiger steke. "*Julle moet julle vyande liefhê,*" het Jesus gesê. Beteken dit dat sy vir mevrou Ransom moet lief wees? Mevrou Ransom haat haar. Dit beteken sekerlik dat sy 'n vyand is. "*Bid vir diegene wat julle vervolg,*" het Jesus gesê. "Wat beteken *vervolg*?"

Mamma steek 'n naald deur een van Pappa se werkshemde. "Dit is wanneer iemand jou wreed behandel, wanneer hulle hatig is op jou."

Pappa laat sak die Bybel op sy skoot. "Jesus is wreed behandel, Hildemara. Toe Hy aan die kruis vasgespyker is, het Hy vir die mense gebid wat Hom seergemaak het. Hy het God gevra om hulle te vergewe omdat hulle nie geweet het wat hulle doen nie."

"Moet ons dit ook doen?"

Mamma kyk omgekrap na Pappa. "Niemand kan so volmaak soos Jesus wees nie."

Pappa kyk nie na haar nie, maar praat met Hildemara. "Die Here sê as ons net vir die mense lief is wat vir ons lief is, is ons niks beter as die mense wat ons wreed behandel nie. As ons net met ons vriende vriendelik is, is ons presies soos ons vyande."

Mamma knoop die garing en knip dit af. "Dit beteken nie dat jy mense moet toelaat om op jou te trap nie. Jy moet opstaan en – "

"Marta." Daar is 'n waarskuwende ondertoon in Pappa se sagte stem wat Mamma haar lippe laat saampers. Pappa sit sy hand op Hildemara se kop. "Dit vra iemand baie spesiaals om 'n vyand lief te hê en vir mense te bid wat met haar lelik is."

"Sy is nie Jesus nie, Niclas." Mamma gooi Pappa se hemp op sy bed. "En as sy was, sou dieselfde einde op haar gewag het. 'n Kruis!" Sy gaan buitentoe en vou haar arms teen die koue.

Pappa maak die Bybel toe. "Slaaptyd."

Van waar sy in haar bed lê, kan Hildemara Mamma en Pappa in gedempte stemme buitekant die tent hoor praat.

"Een van ons moet met daai vrou – "

"Dit gaan alles net erger maak, en jy weet dit."

"Sy kry swaar genoeg sonder dat jy haar hoef te vertel dat sy mense moet toelaat om oor haar te loop. Sy moet leer om vir haarself op te staan."

"Daar is verskillende maniere van staan." Pappa praat nou nóg

sagter.

Hildemara huil gesmoord in haar kombers. Sy wil nie hê Mamma en Pappa moet oor haar baklei nie. Sy bid dat mevrou Ransom sal ophou om haar te vervolg. Sy bid dat mevrou Ransom môre gaaf sal wees. Sy dink aan wat Elizabeth Kenney haar van mevrou Ransom se broer vertel het. Hildemara weet hoe hartseer sy sou wees as daar enigiets met Bernie moes gebeur. Die blote gedagte dat Bernie moet doodgaan, laat Hildemara net nog slegter voel. Hildemara het niks gedoen om mevrou Ransom se haat te verdien nie. Dalk is mevrou Ransom net soos daardie mense wat Jesus doodgemaak het. Dalk weet mevrou Ransom ook nie wat sy doen nie.

Die volgende oggend bid Hildemara die hele pad skool toe. Bernie sê sy moet ophou mompel. "As jy met jouself begin praat, gaan die mense dink jy's mal!"

Die res van die pad bid sy in haar gedagtes. Toe mevrou Ransom die kinders by die klas laat inkom, bid Hildie vir haar. *Jesus, vergewe mevrou Ransom omdat sy so lelik met my is. Sy weet nie wat sy doen nie*.

Die gebed verander niks nie. Trouens, alles word baie erger. Toe die higiëne-inspeksie verby is, kry mevrou Ransom vir Hildemara aan die oor beet en trek haar uit haar stoel op. "Kom staan hier voor, Hildemara Waltert, sodat die ander kinders ordentlik na jou kan kyk!"

Hildemara probeer om nie te huil nie, maar haar hart klop wild. Mevrou Ransom los haar oor lank genoeg om haar aan die skouers beet te kry en om te swaai sodat sy na die klas kyk. "Hou jou hande op, Hildemara. Wys hierdie kinders waarna ek elke oggend moet kyk." Hildemara knyp haar oë styf toe en wens dat sy onsigbaar was. Mevrou Ransom klap haar teen die agterkop. "Doen wat ek vir jou sê!" Hildemara bewe en haar wange brand toe sy haar hande ophou. "Kyk, kinders! Het julle al ooit sulke walglike vingernaels gesien? Sy het hulle tot in die lewe afgekou!"

Vir 'n verandering is daar niemand wat giggel of lag nie.

"Gaan sit op jou plek, Hildemara Waltert."

Toe Pappa daardie aand klaar Bybel gelees het, vra Hildemara of hy in die oorlog geveg het. Hy frons. "Hoekom vra jy so iets?"

"Mevrou Ransom se broer is dood in die oorlog."

"Ek was in Kanada toe dit uitgebreek het."

Mamma praat voordat hy verder kan lees. "As jou pappa in Duitsland was, kon hy ook gesneuwel het, Hildemara. Honderde duisende mense is dood: Franse, Engelse, Kanadese, Amerikaners én Duitsers."

Bernie vra wie die oorlog begin het.

Pappa maak die Bybel toe. "Dis te ingewikkeld om te verduidelik, *Sohn*. Een slegte man het 'n adellike geskiet en twee lande het oorlog verklaar. Toe het vriende van daardie lande kant gekies en kort voor lank was die hele wêreld besig om oorlog te maak."

"Behalwe Switserland," sê Mamma sonder om van haar naaldwerk af op te kyk. "Hulle was slim genoeg om hulle daaruit te hou."

Pappa maak weer sy Bybel oop. "Ja, maar hulle het baie geld daaruit gemaak."

Hildemara verstaan nie waarvan hulle praat nie. "Het enigiemand wat Pappa geken het, doodgegaan, Pappa?"

"My pa. My broers."

Mamma se oë word groot. "Dit is die eerste dat ek van hulle hoor."

Pappa glimlag hartseer vir haar. "Ek is nie uitgebroei nie, Marta. Ek het 'n ma en 'n pa en broers en susters gehad. My ma is dood toe ek so oud soos Hildemara was. My susters was heelwat ouer en het getrou. Ek weet nie wat van een van hulle geword het nie. Ek het briewe geskryf." Hy skud sy kop, sy oë vol trane. "Net die Here weet wat van hulle geword het."

Toe Hildemara die volgende oggend opstaan, vra sy vir Mamma of daar nog 'n oorlog sal wees. "Ek weet nie, Hildemara." Sy klink kwaad en ongeduldig. Nadat sy Hildemara se hare gevleg het, draai sy haar om. "Hoekom al hierdie vrae oor die oorlog? Die oorlog is verby!"

*Nie vir party mense nie*. Sy wil nie vir Mamma sê wat mevrou Ransom elke dag aan haar doen nie, want Mamma sal kwaad word, en as Mamma kwaad word, sal mevrou Ransom nog meer rede hê om vir die Duitsers kwaad te wees.

Hildemara voel jammer vir mevrou Ransom. Sy moet baie hartseer wees om die hele tyd so kwaad te wees. Hildemara bid dat mevrou Ransom 'n ander manier sal kry om oor haar broer se dood te kom, en dat sy dit nie op haar sal uithaal nie.

Mamma lig Hildemara se ken. "Wie het vir jou gesê dat mevrou Ransom se broer in die oorlog dood is?"

"Elizabeth Kenney."

"O. Nou ja, dis geen verskoning nie. God sê ons mag nie wrokke koester nie. Verstaan jy wat ek vir jou sê?" Toe Mamma se oë begin blink, staan sy vinnig op en draai weg. "Moenie jou kosblik vergeet nie. Jy sal moet gou maak, anders gaan Bernhard al halfpad skool toe wees voordat jy hom inhaal."

Toe Hildemara terugkyk, sien sy Mamma buitekant die tent staan,

haar arms om haarself geslaan terwyl sy haar dophou. Hildemara hardloop in die pad af.

## Chapter 18

A few days later, Papa came home, his blue eyes bright with excitement. "I've found a place for us."

Mama stopped stirring the stew over the outside cookfire and straightened. "Where?"

"It's west of Murietta, about two miles outside the town limits, across the big canal. Mrs. Miller lost her husband last year. She needs someone to work the place until her daughter finishes high school. She said she might sell the place then."

"How long before the girl finishes school, Niclas?"

"Four years, I think."

"You didn't sign a contract, did you?"

"Well, I—"

"Tell me you didn't."

"Only two years. You told me to get experience! This is the best way to get it!"

Mama walked off toward the irrigation ditch. Papa followed her. When he put his hand on her shoulder, she shook him off. He talked for a long time, but Mama kept her back to him.

Bernie stood by Hildemara, watching them. "I hope Papa wins. At least we'd have a roof over our heads instead of living in a leaky tent."

* * *

The one house on the property belonged to Mrs. Miller and her daughter, Charlotte, but Mrs. Miller gave Papa permission to build a temporary shelter on the property, with conditions. She didn't want a shack. Mama wanted to speak to the woman herself when she heard Papa had to pay the expenses of building the structure, but Papa ordered her not to go near "the big house."

Over the next few days, Papa built a wooden platform, half walls, and a framework over which he and Mama stretched tent canvas. The canvas sides could be rolled up on warm days, and rolled down in an attempt to keep rain and wind out. Cold air and water still managed to seep in. Papa stacked bricks and made a lean-to where Mama could cook without jeopardizing the tent-house.

Mrs. Miller and her daughter had running water inside the house, but Mama had to use a hose near the barn and carry it bucket by bucket for tent use. Mrs. Miller also had an indoor bathroom, but Papa had to dig a deep hole and build an outhouse over it. Mrs. Miller also

told Papa the children were not allowed near her flower garden. "She has prize roses and shows them at the fair each year." The widow didn't want the children near the house. "She doesn't like noise."

"Mercy, Niclas, what does she expect?"

"Peace and quiet."

"Why don't you ask her where our children can play?"

Papa winked at them. "Anywhere out of sight of the house."

Bernie climbed almond trees and caught frogs in the irrigation ditch and horned toads in the vineyard. Clotilde played with her pretty china doll. Hildemara stayed close to the tent-house and Mama.

The mulberry tree provided shade, but dropped fruit on the canvas roof, staining it with red and purple splotches. Mama grumbled about living like a vagabond. It seemed the bigger Mama's belly grew, the more her temper soured. She had no patience with anyone. Even Papa couldn't soothe her temper.

Summer came early. Mama gave Hildemara the broom and told her to keep the platform swept. Too uncomfortable to stoop, she showed Hildemara how to peel and cut vegetables, how to fry meat, how to make biscuits. Summer boiled and the ground dried up in the heat.

Mama sewed the tent seams tighter, but short of keeping the sides down all day, which made the tent like an oven, she had to leave the canvas rolled high, which allowed dust and sand to blow in all day. Buzzing flies flew circles around Mama, who sat with a swatter in her hand waiting for them to land. Hot August nights had everyone sweating on their cots.

When the baby started coming, Papa had already gone out to work the harvest. Mama called out softly. "Hildemara, go tell Mrs. Miller I'm having a baby. Maybe she'll show some compassion."

Hildemara ran to the back door and pounded. "Stop that racket!" Mrs. Miller peered out through the screen without unlocking it. "If your father needs something, tell him he'll have to wait until it cools off. I'm not coming out in this heat."

"Mama's having the baby!"

"Oh. Well. Congratulations. Go find your father and tell him. He'll have to put one of the men from the work crew in charge until he can see about your mother." She closed the door.

Hildemara ran all over the ranch looking for Papa, then finally found him loading a truck at the far side of the property. When he heard Mama was having the baby, he said something to one of the

Italian workers and ran back to the tent-house. Mama lay on the platform floor, sweat pouring from her beet red face. Hildemara stood in the doorway, not knowing what to do. Mama reached out to her. "Did you talk to Mrs. Miller?"

"Yes, Mama."

"What did she say, Hildemara?"

"Congratulations."

Mama laughed wildly. "What did I tell you about that woman, Niclas?" Mama moaned. "We'll get no help from her or that lazy daughter—" She cried out in pain.

Hildemara started to cry. "Don't die, Mama." Shaking, she sobbed. "Please don't die!"

"I'm not going to die!" She clutched Papa's shirt, her fingers white. "Oh, Jesus. Oh, God of mercy . . ." After a moment, she let out a harsh breath and fell back, panting. "Go on outside, Hildemara. We don't need you."

Papa looked around. "Where's Clotilde?"

Mama gasped, a look of horror filling her face. "Oh, mercy. I don't know!"

"I'm here, Mama." Clotilde stepped around Hildemara and held out a fistful of Mrs. Miller's perfect yellow roses.

* * *

Baby Rikka turned out to be Mama's easiest child, or so Papa said. He tugged Hildemara's pigtail gently. "You were so scrawny, Mama thought you'd die before the end of your first month. But you hung on like a little monkey."

"She's still scrawny." Bernie gave her a pitying look. "Tony says she's skinny as a rail."

Rikka was so plump and sweet, even Hildemara became enamored. Clotilde liked Rikka well enough the first day or two, but when the baby consumed Mama's attention, Clotilde asked if the stork could come back and take her away again. Papa laughed long and hard over that.

"She's beautiful, Niclas." Mama smiled down at Rikka as she nursed. "She has your blonde hair and blue eyes. She's going to be even prettier than Clotilde."

Hildemara took Mama's hand mirror and ran to the barn. Sitting in an empty stall, she studied her face. Did she look like a monkey? She had Mama's hazel eyes and brown hair. She had Papa's straight nose and fair skin. Somehow, even sharing those traits, she wasn't

pretty at all. She burned instead of turning brown like Bernie. Her neck looked like a stalk growing up out of the flowered gingham dress.

Hildemara wished she had been born with Elizabeth Kenney's long red curls and green eyes. Maybe then Mama would be proud of her. Maybe then Mama would speak to her in that loving voice she used with Rikka; look at her with that soft, doting smile. Instead, Mama often looked at her with a frown. She would let out her breath with impatience. She would wave her hand at Hildemara and say, "Go play somewhere else, Hildemara." She would say, "Don't be hanging on to my apron strings all the time!" Mama never said, "Look how sweet Hildemara Rose is . . . look how pretty and sweet . . ."

Maybe Mama didn't like looking at her straight, mousy brown hair and hazel eyes, though Mama had the same. Sometimes, Hildemara wished Mama would hide her disappointment and make excuses for her the way she did the others. Maybe Mama regretted having wasted the name Rose on her. She wasn't poised, pretty, or popular the way she imagined Mama's friend Rosie Gilgan had been. She didn't have Papa's fine singing voice or Mama's intellect. She made a "joyful noise to the Lord," Papa said, and she had to study hard and long to get things into her head.

Whenever Hildie stayed inside the tent-house and offered to help, Mama became impatient. "If I need help, I'll ask for it. Now go on out there! Find something to do! There's a whole world outside the door. Stop hiding in here."

She wasn't hiding. "I want to help, Mama."

"It's no help having you underfoot all day! Go! Fly, Hildemara. For heaven's sake, fly!"

Hildemara didn't know what she meant. She wasn't a bird. What had she done wrong? Maybe Mama never loved her. If Mama loved plump, pink-white babies, then having a scrawny, sickly one would have been a great disappointment. Hildemara tried to gain weight, but no matter how much she ate, she still had skinny legs and bony knees and collarbones that protruded. Clotilde, on the other hand, grew plump and pink and added inches. "Clotilde's going to be taller than Hildemara in another year," Papa said one evening, and Hildie felt even worse.

Sometimes Hildie felt her mother looking at her. When she looked back, Mama would get that troubled expression again. Hildemara wanted to ask what she'd done wrong, what she could do

to make Mama smile and laugh the way she did every day with baby Rikka. Sometimes when Mama did smile at her, it didn't seem to come from pride or pleasure, but sadness, as if Hildemara just couldn't help disappointing her.

Like today.

"Why are you so quiet, Hildemara?"

She looked at Mama nursing the baby. Had her mother ever held her that tenderly? "I was just thinking about school. When does it start?"

"Not until mid-September. So you can stop worrying. You've got a little more time to play and enjoy your summer."

Hildemara started praying for Mrs. Ransom. She taught kindergarten and first grade, so Hildie had only one more year to suffer before she moved up.

* * *

At the end of the harvest, Papa collected his share of the crop money. It wasn't as much as he had hoped, but some other farmers fared worse. Some others fared better, too, Mama said. She'd been to town. She'd talked to people. Papa told her Mrs. Miller said there were extenuating circumstances. Grim-faced, Mama sent the children to bed early. Bernie and Clotilde, having played all day, went to sleep right away, but Hildemara lay awake, troubled and listening.

Papa sighed. "We'll do better next year."

"Not here, we won't. Mrs. Miller told me this morning she expects me to cook and clean for her. Just to make things even, she said. She thinks I should be thankful for the place she's given us." Mama gave a hard laugh. "She can do her own cooking and cleaning. Or hire someone else to do it."

"I'll talk to her."

"When you do, tell her to find someone else to sharecrop her place. They should know they won't get a share of anything."

"We've got no place else to go."

"We'll start asking around. Look what you've done with this place, Niclas. And think how much you learned!"

"I didn't earn any money."

"Because Mrs. Miller isn't any different than Robert Madson. You're a hard worker, Niclas. I've watched how you manage a work crew. The men respect you. You listen to people. You take advice, from men, at least. And with all your engineer training, you've been able to fix Mrs. Miller's farm equipment and get that well pump going.

We'll find a place of our own."

"And how do I pay for it?"

"*We* pay for it with the money I made from the sale of the boardinghouse."

Papa didn't speak.

"Don't look at me like that. I told you why I wasn't willing to give it to you sooner. Madson took advantage of you. So has Mrs. Miller." She gave a soft laugh. "Well, I've decided if anyone is going to take advantage of my husband, it's going to be me."

Hildemara lay in the dark, watching and listening, holding her breath until Papa spoke quietly.

"I could lose everything you saved."

"Not if you listen to me. I've talked to a lot of people around town. I've spent time at the library. I've read the back newspapers. I had to be sure this is where we belong. God may talk to you, Niclas, but He hasn't said anything to me. If I had my choice, you'd be an engineer again. We'd be living in Sacramento or San Francisco. I'd own a hotel with a restaurant! But you hated working for the railroad. If you went back to it, you'd eventually hate me, too."

"Never."

"My father took his misery out on everyone around him."

"Maybe it's just a dream."

Mama's voice softened. "I've had bigger dreams than you. And I haven't given up on them yet. Why should you?" Her voice grew firmer. "But you'd better decide what you want right now. I can start packing tonight. We can go back to Sacramento. You can work for the railroad."

Bernie stirred. "Are they fighting again?"

"Shhhh . . ." Hildemara chewed her fingernails.

"I'm not going back to work for the railroad, Marta. Not now. Not ever."

"All right. Then while you finish out the contract here, we start looking around for land with a house. By this time next year, we can start working for ourselves." When Papa didn't answer, Mama raised her voice. "Can we do any worse than we are right now, living here? How many times have the children been sick during the cold months? And in the summer, we bake like bread in an oven. No matter how much I sweep, I can't keep the place clean! And the flies! I'm lucky I didn't die of infection when Rikka came."

Papa walked away into the night.

Mama let out her breath harshly and sat in the green-willow chair Papa had made for her. Hands folded in her lap, she waited. Hildemara fell asleep and awakened to hear them talking again, more quietly this time.

"We'll do as you suggest, Marta. I pray to God you won't hate me if I lose all your money."

"*We* won't lose it. We'll stand together and fight for it. We'll do whatever we have to do to make a go of it." She gave a faint laugh. "Think of it, Niclas. With a permanent address, I'll be able to get a library card."

Papa pulled her into his arms and kissed her. He dug his fingers into her hair and held her head back as he looked down at her. "Don't let that fire go out, Marta. The world would be too cold for me to bear." Leaning down, he said something in a low, husky voice. When he stepped away, he held out his hand. Mama hesitated, turning her head slightly as though listening for Rikka. Then she slipped her hand into Papa's, and they headed out into the night.

## Hoofstuk 18

’n Paar dae later kom Pappa by die huis aan, sy oë blink van opgewondenheid. “Ek het vir ons ’n plek gekry.”

Mamma kom orent van waar sy besig is om die bredie op die buitenste vuur te roer. “Waar?”

“Dis wes van Murietta, sowat drie kilometer buitekant die dorpsgrens, oorkant die groot kanaal. Mevrou Miller se man is verlede jaar oorlede. Sy het iemand nodig om die plek te bewerk totdat haar dogter klaarmaak met skool. Sy sê dat sy die plek dan moontlik sal verkoop.”

“Hoe lank voordat die kind klaar is met skool, Niclas?”

“Vier jaar, dink ek.”

“Moet asseblief nie vir my sê dat jy ’n kontrak geteken het nie.”

“Wel, ek – ”

“Sê jy het nie.”

“Net vir twee jaar. Jy het gesê ek moet ervaring opdoen! Dit is die beste manier om dit te doen!” Mamma loop weg na die leivoor toe. Pappa volg haar. Toe hy sy arm om haar skouer sit, ruk sy los. Hy praat vir ’n lang ruk, maar Mamma bly met haar rug na hom toe staan.

Bernie staan langs Hildemara en kyk na hulle. “Ek hoop Pappa wen. Ten minste sal ons dan ’n dak oor ons koppe hê en nie meer in ’n lekkende tent bly nie.”

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Die enigste huis op die eiendom behoort aan mevrou Miller en haar dogter, Charlotte, maar mevrou Miller gee vir Pappa toestemming om ’n tydelike geboutjie op die grond op te rig, met voorwaardes. Sy wil nie ’n plakkershut hê nie. Mamma wil self met die vrou praat toe sy hoor dat Pappa die bou-onkostes moet dek, maar Pappa verbied haar om naby “die groot huis” te kom.

Gedurende die volgende paar dae bou Pappa ’n houtdek, halwe mure en ’n raamwerk waaroor hy en Mamma ’n tentseil span. Die kante van die seil kan op warm dae opgerol word, en afgerol word om die wind en reën uit te hou. Dis egter nie heeltemal bestand teen koue lug en water nie. Pappa stapel ’n klomp bakstene opmekaar om ’n afdak te prakseer waar Mamma kan kos maak sonder om die tenthuis in gevaar te stel.

Mevrou Miller en haar dogter het lopende water in die huis, maar Mamma moet ’n pyp naby die skuur gebruik en dit emmer vir emmer na die tenthuis toe dra. Mevrou Miller het ook ’n binnenshuise badkamer, maar Pappa moet ’n diep gat grawe en dit met ’n buitegeboutjie toebou. Mevrou Miller sê ook vir Pappa dat die kinders nie naby die blomtuin toegelaat word nie. “Sy het rose waarmee sy elke jaar gaan skou.” Die weduwee wil die kinders nie naby die huis hê nie. “Sy hou nie van geraas nie.”

“Genade, Niclas, wat verwag sy?”

“Rus en vrede.”

“Hoekom vra jy haar nie waar ons kinders kan speel nie?”

Pappa knipoog vir hulle. “Enige plek waar sy julle nie kan sien nie.”

Bernie klim in die amandelbome en vang paddas in die leisloot en brulpaddas in die wingerd. Clotilde speel met haar mooi porseleinpop. Hildemara sorg dat sy naby die tenthuis en Mamma bly.

Die moerbeiboom gooi ’n skadu, maar die vrugte val op die seildak en laat rooi en pers vlekke. Mamma kla sy is moeg om soos ’n swerwer te lewe. Hoe groter Mamma se maag word, hoe ongeduldiger word sy. Sy het met niemand geduld nie. Selfs Pappa kan haar nie beter laat voel nie.

Die somer is vroeg. Mamma gee die besem vir Hildemara en sê sy moet sorg dat die houtvloer gevee bly. Noudat sy te ongemaklik is om te buk, wys sy vir Hildemara hoe om groente te skil en kerf, hoe om vleis te braai, hoe om brood en beskuit te bak. Dit is ’n bloedige somer en die grond word droog in die hitte.

Mamma werk die seil se some stywer vas, maar omdat die tent in ’n oond verander wanneer die kante afgerol word, moet sy die seil bedags hoog opgerol hou. Die gevolg is dat stof en sand die hele dag inwaai. En wat die aanhoudende vlieë betref, Mamma sit met ’n vlieëplak en wag dat hulle moet kom land. En gedurende die warm Augustusnagte lê hulle op hulle slaapbanke en sweet.

Toe die baba begin kom, is Pappa reeds uit lande toe. Mamma roep sag na haar. “Hildemara, gaan sê vir mevrou Miller die baba is besig

om te kom. Dalk sal haar hart versag."

Hildemara hardloop agter om die huis en hamer teen die deur. "Staak hierdie lawaai!" Mevrou Miller kyk deur die gaasdeur sonder om dit oop te sluit. "As jou pa iets nodig het, moet hy wag tot dit koeler word. Ek gaan nie in hierdie hitte uitkom nie."

"My ma se baba is besig om te kom!"

"O. Nou ja. Veels geluk. Gaan soek jou pa en sê vir hom. Hy sal een van die mans moet aanstel totdat hy klaar na jou ma gekyk het." Sy maak die deur toe.

Hildemara hardloop die hele plaas vol op soek na Pappa. Uiteindelik kry sy hom aan die ander kant van die plaas waar hy besig is om 'n vragmotor te laai. Toe hy hoor dat Mamma in kraam is, sê hy iets vir een van die Italiaanse arbeiders en hardloop terug huis toe. Mamma lê op die houtvloer, en die sweet stroom oor haar bloedrooi gesig. Hildemara staan in die deur, onseker oor wat om te doen. Mamma reik na haar. "Het jy met mevrou Miller gepraat?"

"Ja, Mamma."

"Wat het sy gesê, Hildemara?"

"Veels geluk."

Mamma lag wild. "Wat het ek jou van daardie vrou gesê, Niclas?" Mamma kreun. "Ons sal geen hulp van haar of daardie lui dogter – " Sy gil van die pyn.

Hildemara begin huil. "Moenie doodgaan nie, Mamma." Sy snik. "Moet asseblief nie doodgaan nie!"

"Ek sal nie doodgaan nie!" Sy gryp Pappa se hemp vas, haar kneukels wit. "O, Jesus. O, God van genade ... " Na 'n oomblik laat sy haar asem hard uit en val terug. "Gaan buitentoe, Hildemara. Ons het jou nie nodig nie."

Pappa kyk rond. "Waar's Clotilde?"

Mamma snak na haar asem, haar gesig 'n masker van verskrikking. "Genade tog. Ek weet nie!"

"Ek's hier, Mamma." Clotilde kom van agter Hildemara te voorskyn en hou 'n vuisvol van mevrou Miller se volmaakte geel rose na Mamma toe uit.

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Baba Rikka is blykbaar Mamma se maklikste kind, of so sê Pappa. Hy gee Hildemara se poniestert 'n ligte plukkie. "Jy was so tingerig,

Mamma het gedink jy gaan nie eens 'n maand aan die lewe bly nie. Maar jy het soos 'n klein apie vasgeklou."

"Sy is nog steeds tingerig." Bernie gee haar 'n jammerlike kyk. "Tony sê sy is so maer soos 'n paal."

Rikka is so mollig en vriendelik dat selfs Hildemara haar hart verloor. Vir die eerste dag of twee hou Clotilde van Rikka, maar toe die baba al Mamma se aandag in beslag neem, vra Clotilde of die ooievaar sal terugkom en haar sal kom haal. Pappa lag lank en hard.

"Sy's pragtig, Niclas." Mamma kyk glimlaggend af na Rikka terwyl sy haar voed. "Sy het jou blonde hare en blou oë. Sy gaan selfs mooier as Clotilde wees."

Hildemara neem Mamma se handspieël en hardloop na die skuur toe. Sy gaan sit in 'n leë stal en bestudeer haar gesig. Lyk sy soos 'n apie? Sy het Mamma se ligbruin oë en bruin hare. Sy het Pappa se reguit neus en ligte vel. En tog, ten spyte van die gelaatstrekke wat sy by hom gekry het, is sy glad nie mooi nie. Sy verbrand in die son en Bernie word bruin. Haar nek lyk soos 'n stingel wat uit die geblomde katoenrok groei.

Hildemara wens dat sy met Elizabeth Kenney se lang rooi krulhare en groen oë gebore is. Dalk sou Mamma dan trots op haar gewees het. Dalk sou Mamma dan in daardie liefdevolle stem met haar gepraat het waarmee sy met Rikka gesels; en met daardie sagte, liefkosende glimlag na haar gekyk het. Maar Mamma kyk dikwels met 'n frons na haar. Sy sal dikwels ongeduldig sug. Sy sal dikwels 'n afwerende gebaar maak en sê: "Gaan speel iewers anders, Hildemara." Sy sal dikwels sê: "Moenie die hele tyd aan my rokspante hang nie!" Mamma sê nooit: "Kyk hoe oulik is Hildemara Rose ... kyk hoe mooi en lief ... " nie.

Dalk hou Mamma nie daarvan om na haar reguit, vaal hare en ligbruin oë te kyk nie, al lyk Mamma s'n ook so. Soms wens Hildemara dat Mamma haar teleurstelling wou wegsteek en vir haar verskoning maak, nes sy met die ander doen. Dalk is Mamma spyt dat sy die naam Rose op haar gemors het. Sy is nie elegant, mooi of gewild soos wat Mamma se vriendin Rosie Gilgan was nie. Sy het nie Pappa se mooi sangstem of Mamma se verstand nie. Pappa sê dis net belangrik dat sy bedoel wat sy sing; en sy moet hard en lank leer voordat sy iets in haar kop kry.

Wanneer Hildie in die tent bly en aanbied om te help, raak Mamma ongeduldig. "As ek hulp nodig het, sal ek daarvoor vra. Toe, loop nou. Gaan kry iets om te doen! Daar is 'n hele wêreld buitekant die tent.

Hou op om hier weg te kruip."

Sy het nie kom wegkruip nie. "Ek wil help, Mamma."

"Jy help my nie as jy die hele dag onder my voete is nie! Gaan! Vlieg, Hildemara. Om hemelsnaam, vlieg!"

Hildemara verstaan nie wat sy bedoel nie. Sy is nie 'n voël nie. Wat het sy verkeerd gedoen? Dalk was Mamma nooit lief vir haar nie. As Mamma van plomp, pienkwit babatjies hou, moes dit 'n groot teleurstelling gewees het om 'n tingerige, sieklike een te hê. Hildemara probeer gewig optel, maar maak nie saak hoeveel sy eet nie, sy het nog steeds maer bene en knopperige knieë en uitstaansleutelbene. Clotilde, aan die ander kant, is fris en pienk en het sentimeters gerek. "Clotilde gaan oor nog 'n jaar langer as Hildemara wees," sê Pappa een aand en Hildie voel net nog slegter.

Soms kan Hildie haar ma se oë op haar voel. Wanneer sy terugkyk, kry Mamma weer daardie ongedurige uitdrukking. Hildemara wil vra wat sy verkeerd gedoen het, wat sy kan doen om Mamma te laat glimlag en lag soos sy elke dag by Rikka doen. Wanneer Mamma partykeer wel vir haar glimlag, lyk dit nie asof dit uit trots of genot is nie, maar uit hartseer, asof Hildemara nie kan help om haar teleur te stel nie.

Soos vandag.

"Waarom is jy so stil, Hildemara?"

Sy kyk hoe Mamma die baba voed. Het haar ma haar ooit met soveel teerheid vasgehou? "Ek dink aan skool. Wanneer begin dit weer?"

"Eers middel-September. Jy kan ophou bang wees. Jy het nog genoeg tyd om te speel en jou somer te geniet."

Hildemara begin vir mevrou Ransom bid. Sy is die voorskoolse en graadeen-onderwyseres; dus het Hildie nog net een jaar se lyding voordat sy 'n ander onderwyseres kry.

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Aan die einde van die oes kry Pappa sy deel van die oesgeld. Dit is nie soveel as wat hy gehoop het nie, maar sommige van die boere het swakker gevaar. Daar is ook dié wat beter gevaar het, sê Mamma. Sy was op die dorp. Sy het met mense gepraat. Pappa het vir haar gesê mevrou Miller het gesê daar was verswarende omstandighede. Daardie aand stuur Mamma die kinders vroeg bed toe. Bernie en Clotilde,

moeg gespeel, raak dadelik aan die slaap, maar Hildemara lê wakker en hoor wat haar ouers praat.

Pappa sug. "Ons sal volgende jaar beter doen."

"Nie as ons hier is nie. Mevrou Miller sê vanoggend dat sy van my verwag om te kook en skoon te maak. 'Net om dinge gelyk te maak,' sê sy. Sy dink ek behoort dankbaar te wees vir die plek wat sy ons gegee het." Mamma lag hard. "Sy kan haar eie kos maak en huis aan die kant hou. Of iemand anders betaal om dit te doen."

"Ek sal met haar praat."

"Sê dan sommer sy moet iemand anders kry om vir haar te boer. Wie dit ook al is, moet net weet hulle gaan niks uit haar kry nie."

"Daar is nêrens anders waarheen ons kan gaan nie."

"Ons kan begin rondvra. Kyk wat het jy met hierdie plek gedoen, Niclas. En dink hoeveel jy geleer het!"

"Ek het nie enige geld verdien nie."

"Want mevrou Miller is niks beter as Robert Madson nie. Jy werk hard, Niclas. Ek het gesien hoe jy met die arbeiders te werk gaan. Die mans respekteer jou. Jy luister na mense. Jy volg advies. Van mans, bygesê. En met jou opleiding as ingenieur het jy mevrou Miller se plaasimplemente herstel en daardie pomp aan die gang gekry. Ons sal ons eie plek kry."

"En hoe betaal ek daarvoor?"

"Óns betaal daarvoor met die geld wat ek uit die losieshuis gemaak het."

Pappa sê niks nie.

"Moenie so na my kyk nie. Ek het vir jou gesê waarom ek nie bereid was om dit vroeër vir jou te gee nie. Madson het jou misbruik. En nou mevrou Miller." Sy gee 'n sagte laggie. "Nou het ek besluit dat as enigiemand my man gaan misbruik, dit ek sal wees."

Hildemara lê in die donker, haar ore gespits en haar asem ingetrek, totdat Pappa sag praat.

"Ek kan alles verloor wat jy gespaar het."

"Nie as jy na my luister nie. Ek het met baie mense op die dorp gepraat. Ek was 'n paar keer by die biblioteek. Ek het koerant gelees. Ek moes seker maak dat ons hier hoort. Die Here praat dalk met jou, Niclas, maar Hy het niks vir my gesê nie. As ek my sin kon hê, sou jy weer 'n ingenieur wees. Ons sou in Sacramento of San Francisco gebly het. Ek sou 'n hotel met 'n restaurant gehad het! Maar jy het jou werk by die spoorweg gehaat. As jy soontoe moes teruggaan, sou jy my uiteindelik ook gehaat het."

"Nooit nie."

"My pa het sy ongelukkigheid op almal rondom hom uitgehaal."

"Dalk is dit net 'n droom."

Mamma klink nou vriendeliker. "Ek het groter drome as jy gehad. En ek het hulle nog nie laat vaar nie. Hoekom moet jy?" Dan vervolg sy fermer. "Maar jy beter nou besluit wat jy wil hê. Ek kan vanaand begin pak. Ons kan weer Sacramento toe gaan. Jy kan vir die spoorweg gaan werk."

Langs haar beweeg Bernie. "Is hulle weer besig om te baklei?"

"Sjuut ... " Hildemara kou haar naels.

"Ek gaan nie weer vir die spoorweg werk nie, Marta. Nie nou nie. Nooit nie."

"Nou goed. Terwyl jy jou kontrak hier voltooi, kan ons na 'n stuk grond met 'n huis begin soek. Teen hierdie tyd volgende jaar kan ons vir onsself begin werk." Toe Pappa nie antwoord nie, vervolg Mamma harder. "Kan ons enigsins slegter doen as op hierdie plek? Hoeveel keer was die kinders siek hierdie winter? En in die somer bak ons soos brood in 'n oond. Maak nie saak hoeveel ek vee nie, ek kan nie die plek skoon hou nie! En die vlieë! Ek kan bly wees dat ek nie van infeksie dood is toe Rikka gebore is nie."

Pappa loop buitentoe, die nag in.

Mamma laat haar asem hard uit en sit op die wilgerhoutstoel wat Pappa vir haar gemaak het. Sy wag met haar hande op haar skoot gevou. Hildemara raak aan die slaap en word wakker toe hulle weer sag praat.

"Ons sal maak soos jy sê, Marta. Maar ek bid om Vadersnaam dat jy my nie sal haat as ek al jou geld verloor nie."

"Óns gaan dit nie verloor nie. Ons sal saam staan en daarvoor baklei. Ons sal doen wat ons moet om dit te laat werk." Sy lag flou. "Dink daaraan, Niclas. Met 'n permanente adres sal ek 'n biblioteekkaart kan kry."

Pappa vou haar in sy arms toe en soen haar. Hy stoot sy vingers deur haar hare en hou haar kop agteroor terwyl hy na haar kyk. "Moenie dat hierdie vuur uitgaan nie, Marta. Die wêreld sal vir my te koud wees." Dan leun hy af en sê iets in 'n lae, skor stem. Toe hy wegstaan, hou hy sy hand uit. Mamma huiwer en draai haar kop effens asof om te luister of sy Rikka hoor. Dan neem sy Pappa se hand en hulle verdwyn saam die donkerte in.

## Chapter 19

**1923**

On the last day of school, Hildemara skipped down the road, heart light. She had all summer to forget how much she hated going to school. She had been devastated by Mrs. Ransom's announcement that starting next year, the second-grade class would be combined with kindergarten and first grade, and she would be teaching all of them. Hildemara had hoped that after this year, she would have a new teacher. But then she decided it just meant God didn't want her to stop praying for Mrs. Ransom quite yet.

Hildemara had learned not to complain about Mrs. Ransom. It only made Mama more angry and changed nothing. She had prayed every morning on her way to school and prayed often while in class, especially when Mrs. Ransom's eyes fell upon her like a hawk on a mouse. When she hauled Hildemara in front of the class to make an example of her poor attire or dirty shoes or chewed fingernails or scraggly hair, Hildemara prayed the words would float out the window and off into the air, never to be remembered. The room would become so silent, Mrs. Ransom's harsh words seemed to echo, and she would tire of carrying on and tell Hildemara to go back to her chair.

Now she sang thank-you prayers until Bernie said she sounded bad enough to crack the sky wide open. So what if she had one more year in Mrs. Ransom's class before she moved on to another teacher. She could be brave for another year. She wouldn't let any tears slip down her cheeks. *"Sticks and stones may break your bones,"* the children chanted, *"but words will never hurt you."* She wondered whoever came up with such a thing because it wasn't true at all. Sometimes Mrs. Ransom said things that ripped at Hildemara's heart and left her hurting for days.

Papa said to forgive, but forgiveness wasn't easy. Not when the same thing happened over and over again.

Summer passed in a haze of heat. Hildemara did chores around the house. She fed the chickens and collected the eggs, washed dishes and helped weed the garden. She took Papa's lunch out to him while Mama tried to batten down the canvas sides of the tent to keep the dust from blowing in on a napping Rikka.

As school approached, Hildemara worried and prayed continuously that Mrs. Ransom wouldn't be mean to Clotilde, who

would be in kindergarten this year. Maybe Mrs. Ransom just didn't like ugly children, any more than Mama did. Hildemara prayed her younger sister's pretty blue eyes and blonde hair would soften Mrs. Ransom's heart in a way her own respectful silence and obedience never had.

She decided not to warn Clotilde about Mrs. Ransom. She didn't want her to have nightmares and start chewing her nails, too. When they bathed in the big tub together the night before school started, she told Clotilde to wash behind her ears and around her neck. Clotilde splashed soapy water in her face.

The next morning, Hildemara felt sick to her stomach, but she didn't say anything. She knew Mama would send her to school anyway, and she didn't want to answer questions. Bernie ran ahead to meet his friends. Mama had put Hildemara in charge of Clotilde, so Hildie allowed her younger sister to set the pace. "Stay on the road, Clotilde! Don't get dusty."

"You want a wagon to run over me?"

"You have to keep your shoes clean!"

"I can get dirty if I want!" Sticking her tongue out, she kicked dust all over Hildemara.

"Stop it!"

Clotilde took off running, and Hildemara ran to catch up. Laughing, Clotilde shrieked and ran faster. Hildemara tripped and fell headlong on the macadam, scraping her hands, elbows, and knees. Shocked by the pain, she pushed herself up. When she looked at her hands, she saw tiny pebbles under the bleeding skin. Now what was she going to do?

Clotilde ran back. "Ohhhh." She looked at Hildie's knees and elbows.

Still crying, Hildemara dusted herself off as best she could. "We're going to be late." She limped alongside her little sister. "When we're called to line up, we have to be in alphabetical order. There's no one after Waltert. So we're last."

When they arrived at school, Hildie went into the girls' bathroom to wash. Her hands stung like fire. She dabbed cold water on her knees, dismayed to see how the blood had already dripped down her legs and stained her socks. The blood from her scraped elbows had gotten on her dress as well. What would Mrs. Ransom have to say about that? What would Mama say?

Giving up, she went outside, worried Clotilde might be frightened

on her first day of school. But Clotilde had already met a girl her own age and was playing hopscotch.

Mrs. Ransom came out. “Kindergarten, first, and second, line up here!” The other children ran to make two lines, boys and girls. Hildemara limped after them, taking last place in line behind Clotilde, who stood head high marching in place until the lines filed into the classroom.

Mrs. Ransom looked at them as they entered. “Another Waltert.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Hildemara flashed a bright smile that seemed to disarm Mrs. Ransom.

“And this one is pretty.”

Hildemara’s name had been taped on a front-row desk this year. Heart pounding with dread, Hildemara put her hand over her heart, recited the Pledge of Allegiance with the class, sang “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” and slid cautiously into her seat so she wouldn’t bump her aching knees. She prayed Mrs. Ransom wouldn’t say anything mean to Clotilde.

She kept glancing back as Mrs. Ransom checked each child’s hands. Clotilde held her hands with limp wrists, turning them up and down so Mrs. Ransom could see. Mrs. Ransom looked dubious, but didn’t say anything. Letting out her breath in relief, Hildemara turned around and faced the front of the class.

“Hildemara.” Mrs. Ransom stood beside her desk. Head down, Hildemara held her hands out, palms down. “Turn them over.” When she did, Mrs. Ransom gasped. “Your hands are a mess. Go wash them.”

“I did.”

“Don’t talk back to me.” Mrs. Ransom grabbed Hildemara by the hair, yanking her from her seat. Hildemara banged her scraped knee on the desk and cried out in pain.

Clotilde ran at Mrs. Ransom, screaming, “Leave my sister alone!” She grabbed the teacher’s skirt and yanked. When Mrs. Ransom let go of Hildemara and turned, Clotilde kicked her hard in the shins. “You’re hurting my sister!” Clotilde stomped on Mrs. Ransom’s toes.

The class erupted in laughter and shouts.

Terrified at what Mrs. Ransom would do to Clotilde, Hildemara grabbed her sister by the hand and ran for the door. Mrs. Ransom cried out. Hildemara didn’t stop running until they were around the side of the building.

“Why did you do that, Clotilde? Why?”

"She hurt you! She's mean! I hate her!"

"Don't say that! Papa says we aren't supposed to hate anyone." She tried to calm her sister. "Papa said people were mean to Jesus, too, and He didn't kick anyone."

Clotilde started to blubber. "I don't want to be crucified." Her blue eyes became glassy with tears. "Is Mrs. Ransom going to pound nails in our hands and feet?"

"We have to be kind to Mrs. Ransom no matter what she does. Her brother got killed in the war, Clotilde. She hates us because Papa's German. We have to pray for her."

Clotilde's chin wobbled. "Papa didn't kill anyone."

"She doesn't know that, Clotilde. She's very sad and angry. Jesus prayed for the people who hurt Him. I've been praying for Mrs. Ransom for two years. We have to keep praying for her. Mrs. Ransom is just like those people who killed Jesus. She doesn't know what she's doing." Hildemara heard a strangled sound behind her and her heart raced in fear. Glancing up, she saw Mrs. Ransom standing at the corner of the building, her hands covering her mouth, her eyes wild with pain.

Hildemara put herself in front of Clotilde. "She didn't mean to do it, Mrs. Ransom."

Mrs. Ransom uttered that awful sound again. When she reached out, Hildemara grabbed Clotilde's hand and ran.

"Hildemara!" Mrs. Ransom called after them. "Wait!"

Hildemara and Clotilde kept running.

* * *

"Do we have to go back to school tomorrow?" Clotilde sat beside Hildemara. They had hidden in the first orchard after leaving town. Hildemara said they couldn't go home. They had to go back when school let out, or Bernie would be looking for them.

"I don't know what we're going to do." Hildemara wiped tears away with the back of her hand.

"Is Mama going to be mad at me?"

"Mama put me in charge of you. Remember? She'll be mad at *me*."

"I'll tell her why I kicked Mrs. Ransom."

Hildemara sniffled. "That will just make everything worse." When she pulled her legs up, her knees throbbed with pain. Sobbing, Hildie didn't know what to do or where to go.

Clotilde snuggled close to her. "Don't cry, Hildie. I'm sorry."

They waited all morning and went back to school in the early afternoon. They stood at a distance, hiding behind the trunk of an old elm tree. The children came outside for their last recess. Mr. Loyola, the principal, stood on the playground. Mrs. Ransom was nowhere in sight. Whenever he looked their way, Hildemara and Clotilde ducked back behind the tree. Finally school let out, and Bernie came outside the fence.

"We're over here, Bernie." Hildemara waved from their hiding place.

Bernie ran to them. "Boy, are you two in trouble! People have been out looking for you all day. Where have you been?"

Hildemara shrugged.

Bernie looked at Clotilde. "I heard you attacked Mrs. Ransom."

Hildemara and Clotilde looked at one another and didn't say anything. They had already agreed to a pact of silence.

"Well, come on then. We'd better go home."

The three of them hurried across the highway and walked through town, Hildemara dreading every step, wondering what Mama and Papa would say when Bernie told them what he had heard. They had just turned onto the road out of town when Mr. Loyola pulled up alongside them in his motorcar. "Climb in, children. I'll take you home."

Bernie jumped in. "This is my first time in an automobile!" Clotilde climbed in behind him just as eagerly. Hildemara didn't want to get in. She didn't want to go home either. She didn't know what to do.

Mr. Loyola leaned forward, looking past Bernie and Clotilde. "You too, Hildemara." Feeling doomed, Hildemara sat in back next to Clotilde. Bernie asked all kinds of questions about the car on the way home. Clotilde bounced excitedly, Mrs. Ransom forgotten.

Mama came out of the tent-house when Mr. Loyola pulled into Mrs. Miller's yard. She looked surprised when Bernie jumped out of the motorcar, and then Clotilde. Hildemara climbed out last, dizzy and feeling sick to her stomach. She dared a glance at Mama.

The principal took his hat off and held it in both hands. "May I speak with you, Mrs. Waltert?"

Bernie had already run off for the orchard to find Papa, undoubtedly eager to tell him about the ride and what had happened at school. Clotilde stood beside Hildemara, looking from Mr. Loyola to Mama and back again.

"Go on and play, you two." Clotilde didn't need a second invitation. She took off after Bernie, leaving Hildemara standing alone and feeling exposed. Mama gave her an odd look and then forced a pleasant smile at Mr. Loyola. "Why don't you come inside, Mr. Loyola? You'll have to sit on a cot. We don't have any furniture. Shall I fix some coffee?"

"No, ma'am. I won't stay too long."

Hildemara sat with her back against the wall of the pump house. Mama and Mr. Loyola talked for a long time. When the principal came outside, he looked around the yard. Raking his hand back through his hair, he put on his hat, got in his car, and drove away.

Mama didn't come outside for a long time. Hildemara pushed herself up and crossed the yard. Mama sat on a cot, her face in her hands. "I'm sorry, Mama."

"What are *you* sorry about?" Mama sounded angry. She dropped her hands in her lap and raised her head. Eyes red, face blotchy, Mama winced. "What happened to your knees, Hildemara?"

"I fell on the road."

"Where else are you hurting?"

Hildie showed her elbows and hands.

"And that's all?"

Hildemara didn't know what her mother wanted her to say.

"We're going to have to clean those wounds or they'll get infected." Mama grabbed the water bucket and went out to fill it. Hildemara didn't think her day could get any worse until Mama came back. "It's going to hurt, Hildemara, and there's nothing we can do about it." She gave her Papa's razor strop. "We have to get the pebbles and dirt out, then scrub with soap before putting on antiseptic. You bite down hard on that strop when you feel like screaming or Mrs. Miller will think I'm out here beating my children."

When it was over, Hildemara lay limp on her cot, drained of tears; hands, knees, and elbows on fire.

"We'll put on bandages when the wounds dry."

Papa came in a few minutes later, Bernie and Clotilde trailing behind him. "How is she?"

"She's a mess!" Mama's voice broke. She tipped Clotilde's head and leaned down to kiss her. "At least we have one girl who knows how to fight back!" Turning away, she went outside. Papa went outside and talked with her. When he came back, Mama wasn't with him.

Hildemara lay on her cot, watching Mama walk away. She had disappointed her again.

Clotilde peered out the tent-house door. “Where’s Mama going?”

“She’s taking a walk. Don’t bother her. Go on outside for a while. Everything is fine. Bernhard, make certain she doesn’t get near Mrs. Miller’s roses.” Papa lifted Hildemara carefully onto his lap. He brushed the hair back from her face and kissed her cheeks. “Mrs. Ransom won’t be your teacher anymore. She went to Mr. Loyola after you and Clotilde ran away. She quit her job, *Liebling*.”

“She hates me, Papa. She’s always hated me.”

“I don’t think she hates you anymore.”

Hildie’s mouth wobbled and she burst out crying again. “I prayed for her, Papa. I wanted Mrs. Ransom to like me. I prayed and prayed and my prayers never changed anything.”

Papa pressed her head gently against his shoulder. “Prayers changed you, Hildemara. You learned to love your enemy.”

# Hoofstuk 19

## 1923

Op die laaste skooldag huppel Hildemara met ’n ligte hart terug huis toe. Sy het die hele somer om te vergeet hoe sy dit by die skool haat. Sy was platgeslaan deur mevrou Ransom se aankondiging dat die graadtwees volgende jaar saam met die kleuterskool en graadeens ingedeel gaan word, en dat sy weer hulle juffrou gaan wees. Hildemara het gehoop dat sy ná hierdie jaar ’n nuwe onderwyseres sou hê. Maar dan besluit sy dit beteken die Here wil hê dat sy vir mevrou Ransom moet bly bid.

Hildemara het geleer om nie oor mevrou Ransom te kla nie. Dit maak Mamma net nog kwater en verander niks aan die situasie nie. Sy het elke oggend op pad skool toe gebid, en dikwels in die klas, veral wanneer mevrou Ransom se oë soos dié van ’n valk op haar rus. Wanneer sy Hildemara vorentoe roep om ’n voorbeeld van haar swak kleredrag of vuil skoene of afgekoude naels of slordige hare te maak, het Hildemara gebid dat die woorde deur die venster sou wegsweef en dat sy dit nie sou onthou nie. Soms het die klas so stil geword dat mevrou Ransom vir haar eie tirade moeg geraak het en Hildemara na haar stoel toe gestuur het.

Nou sing sy dankliedere totdat Bernie sê dat sy sleg genoeg klink om die honde aan die tjank te sit. Wat daarvan as sy nog ’n jaar in mevrou Ransom se klas is voordat sy ’n ander juffrou kry? Sy sal vir nog ’n jaar kan uithou. Sy sal nie toelaat dat haar trane kom nie. “*Sticks and stones may break your bones,*” praatsing die kinders, “*but words will never hurt you.*” Sy wonder wie so iets uitgedink het, want dit is glad nie waar nie. Soms sê mevrou Ransom dinge wat Hildemara se hart aan flarde ruk en die seer dae lank laat aanhou.

Pappa sê ’n mens moet vergewe, maar vergifnis is nie maklik nie. Nie wanneer dieselfde ding oor en oor gebeur nie.

Die somer beweeg in ’n waas van hitte verby. Hildemara help met allerhande huiswerkies. Sy voer die hoenders en gaan haal die eiers

uit, was skottelgoed en help onkruid uittrek. Sy vat vir Pappa kos terwyl Mamma die seilpante van die tent probeer vasmaak om te keer dat die stof op die slapende Rikka kom lê.

Namate die vakansie ten einde loop, groei Marta se kommer en bid sy gedurig dat mevrou Ransom nie met Clotilde sal lelik wees wat hierdie jaar kleuterskool toe gaan nie. Dalk hou mevrou Ransom net nie van lelike kinders nie, soos Mamma. Hildemara bid dat haar kleiner sussie se mooi blou oë en blonde hare mevrou Ransom se hart op ’n manier sal versag waarin sy met haar onderdanige swygsaamheid en gehoorsaamheid nie kon slaag nie.

Sy besluit dat sy Clotilde nie oor mevrou Ransom gaan waarsku nie. Sy wil nie hê sy moet nagmerries kry en ook haar naels begin kou nie. Toe hulle die aand voor die eerste skooldag saam bad, maan sy Clotilde om agter haar ore en mooi om haar nek te was. Clotilde spat van die seperige water in haar gesig.

Hildemara sê niks toe sy die volgende oggend naar voel nie. Sy weet dat Mamma haar in elk geval gaan skool toe stuur, en sy wil nie vrae antwoord nie. Bernie hardloop vooruit na sy vriende toe. Mamma het Clotilde in Hildemara se sorg geplaas, en Hildie laat haar sussie die pas aangee. “Bly op die pad, Clotilde! Moenie vol stof raak nie.”

“Wil jy hê ek moet omgery word?”

“Moenie dat jou skoene vuil word nie!”

“Ek kan vuil word as ek wil.” Sy steek haar tong uit en skop dat die stof om Hildemara staan.

“Hou op!”

Clotilde begin hardloop en Hildemara moet uithaal om haar in te haal. Clotilde lag en gee ’n gilletjie. Hildemara struikel en slaan op die teerpad neer. Haar hande, elmboë en knieë is nerfaf. Sy staan seer op en toe sy na haar hande kyk, sien sy daar sit klein klippies onder haar stukkende vel. Wat op aarde gaan sy nou doen?

Clotilde kom teruggehardloop. “Hildie!” Sy kyk na Hildemara se knieë en elmboë.

Hildemara huil terwyl sy haar so goed moontlik afstof. “Ons gaan laat wees.” Sy hink saam met haar sussie verder. “Wanneer al die kinders geroep word, moet ons in alfabetiese volgorde staan. Daar is niemand ná Waltert nie. Ons is dus die laastes.”

By die skool aangekom, gaan Hildie reguit kleedkamer toe om haar te was. Haar hande brand soos vuur. Sy klad koue water op haar knieë en haar moed sak in haar skoene toe sy sien dat die bloed reeds teen haar bene afgeloop en haar kouse gevlek het. Die bloed van haar

stukkende elmboë het ook op haar rok gekom. Wat sal mevrou Ransom hieroor sê? Wat gaan Mamma sê?

Toe sy moedeloos besef dat sy niks daaraan kan doen nie, gaan sy uit, bekommerd dat Clotilde dalk op haar eerste skooldag sal bang wees. Maar Clotilde het alreeds ’n dogtertjie van haar ouderdom ontmoet en is besig om ’n speletjie te speel.

Mevrou Ransom kom uit. “Kleuterskool, eerstes en tweedes, kom staan in julle rye!” Die ander kinders hardloop om twee rye, meisies en seuns, te vorm. Hildemara kom hinkend agterna en val op haar plek in, agter Clotilde, wat kop omhoog op een plek staan en marsjeer totdat hulle by die klaskamer ingaan.

Mevrou Ransom kyk na hulle soos hulle ingaan. “Nog ’n Waltert.”

“Ja, Mevrou,” Mevrou Ransom lyk amper ontwapen deur Hildemara se breë glimlag.

“En hierdie een is mooi.”

Hildemara se naam is hierdie jaar op een van die voorste banke vasgeplak. Met ’n hart onstuimig van vrees sit Hildemara haar hand oor haar hart terwyl sy die volkslied sing en versigtig by haar bank inskuif sodat sy nie haar stukkende knieë stamp nie. Sy bid dat mevrou Ransom nie iets leliks vir Clotilde sal sê nie.

Sy bly omkyk terwyl mevrou Ransom na elke kind se hande kyk. Clotilde steek haar hande uit en draai hulle om sodat die onderwyseres kan kyk. Mevrou Ransom weifel ’n oomblik, maar sê niks nie. Hildemara slaak ’n sug van verligting toe sy weer na die voorkant van die klas draai.

“Hildemara.” Mevrou Ransom kom staan langs haar bank. Hildemara hou haar hande uit, palms na onder. “Draai hulle om.” Toe sy so maak, snak mevrou Ransom na haar asem. “Jou hande is in ’n toestand. Gaan was hulle.”

“Ek het.”

“Moenie met my terugpraat nie.” Mevrou Ransom gryp Hildemara aan die hare en ruk haar op uit haar stoel. Hildemara stamp haar stukkende knie teen die tafel en ’n kreet ontsnap oor haar lippe.

Clotilde storm gillend op mevrou Ransom af. “Los my sussie!” Sy gryp die onderwyseres aan die romp en pluk. Toe mevrou Ransom Hildemara los en omdraai, skop Clotilde haar hard op die maermerrie. “Juffrou maak my sussie seer!” Clotilde trap op mevrou Ransom se tone.

Daar is chaos in die klas soos die kinders lag en gil.

Angsbevange oor wat mevrou Ransom aan Clotilde gaan doen, gryp

Hildemara haar sussie aan die hand en hardloop by die deur uit. Mevrou Ransom gil. Hildemara hardloop totdat hulle om die hoek van die gebou is.

"Hoekom het jy dit gedoen, Clotilde? Hoekom?"

"Sy het jou seergemaak! Sy's lelik! Ek haat haar!"

"Moet dit nie sê nie. Pappa sê ons mag niemand haat nie." Sy probeer haar sussie kalmeer. "Pappa het gesê dat die mense ook met Jesus lelik was, en Hy het niemand geskop nie."

Clotilde begin stamel. "Ek wil nie gekruisig word nie." Haar blou oë swem in die trane. "Gaan mevrou Ransom spykers in ons hande en voete kap?"

"Ons moet mooi maak met mevrou Ransom, maak nie saak wat sy doen nie. Haar broer is dood in die oorlog, Clotilde. Sy haat ons omdat Pappa 'n Duitser is. Ons moet vir haar bid."

Clotilde se ken bewe. "Pappa het niemand doodgemaak nie."

"Sy weet dit nie, Clotilde. Sy is baie hartseer en kwaad. Jesus het vir die mense gebid wat Hom seergemaak het. Ek bid al twee jaar vir mevrou Ransom. Ons moet aanhou om vir haar te bid. Mevrou Ransom is net soos daardie mense wat Jesus doodgemaak het. Sy weet nie wat sy doen nie." Hildemara hoor 'n gewurgde geluid agter haar en haar hartklop versnel. Toe sy opkyk, sien sy mevrou Ransom by die hoek van die gebou staan, haar hande oor haar mond, haar oë wild van pyn.

Hildemara plant haarself voor Clotilde. "Sy het nie bedoel om dit te doen nie, mevrou Ransom."

Mevrou Ransom maak weer daardie aaklige geluid. Toe sy haar hand uitsteek, gryp Hildemara Clotilde aan die hand en hardloop.

"Hildemara!" roep mevrou Ransom agterna. "Wag!"

Hildemara en Clotilde hou aan hardloop.

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"Moet ons môre weer skool toe gaan?" Clotilde sit langs Hildemara. Hulle het in die eerste boord aan die dorpsgrens kom wegkruip. Hildemara het gesê hulle kan nie huis toe gaan nie. Hulle moet teruggaan wanneer die skool uitkom, anders gaan Bernie na hulle soek.

"Ek weet nie wat ons gaan doen nie." Hildemara vee haar trane met die agterkant van haar hand af.

“Gaan Mamma kwaad wees vir my?”

“Mamma het gesê ek moet na jou kyk. Onthou? Sy gaan vir mý kwaad wees.”

“Ek sal vir haar sê hoekom ek mevrou Ransom geskop het.”

Hildemara snuif. “Dit gaan alles net erger maak.” Toe sy haar bene optrek, klop haar knieë van die pyn. Sy weet nie wat om te doen of waarnatoe om te gaan nie en begin snik.

Clotilde skuif nader aan haar. “Moenie huil nie, Hildie. Ek’s jammer.”

Nadat hulle die hele oggend gewag het, loop hulle vroegmiddag terug skool toe. Hulle gaan staan agter die stam van ’n ou olmboom ’n entjie van die skool af. Hulle sien hoe die kinders vir hulle laaste pouse uitkom. Meneer Loyola, die skoolhoof, staan op die speelterrein. Mevrou Ransom is nêrens te sien nie. Elke keer wanneer hy in hulle rigting kyk, koes Hildemara en Clotilde agter die boom in. Uiteindelik is die skooldag verby en Bernie kom deur die hek gedrentel.

“Hier is ons, Bernie.” Hildemara wuif vanuit hulle wegkruipplek.

Bernie hardloop na hulle toe. “Julle is in groot moeilikheid. Hulle soek julle al die hele dag. Waar was julle?”

Hildemara sê niks.

Bernie kyk na Clotilde. “Ek hoor jy het mevrou Ransom aangeval.”

Hildemara en Clotilde kyk na mekaar en sê niks nie. Hulle het hulle reeds tot ’n verdrag van swye verbind.

“Nou ja, kom ons loop. Ons beter by die huis kom.”

Hulle hardloop oor die grootpad en loop deur die dorp. Hildemara se vrees word met elke tree groter. Wat gaan Mamma en Pappa sê wanneer Bernie vir hulle sê wat hy gehoor het? Hulle het net by die pad gekom wat uit die dorp loop toe meneer Loyola langs hulle stilhou. “Klim in, kinders. Ek sal julle huis toe vat.”

Bernie spring in. “Dis my eerste keer in ’n kar!” Clotilde klim net so gretig agter hom in. Hildemara wil nie inklim nie. Sy wil ook nie huis toe gaan nie. Sy weet nie wat om te doen nie.

Meneer Loyola leun vorentoe en kyk verby Bernie en Clotilde. “Jy ook, Hildemara.” Sy voel soos ’n veroordeelde waar sy agter langs Clotilde sit. Op pad huis toe vra Bernie allerhande soorte vrae oor die kar. Clotilde wip uitgelate op en af, mevrou Ransom vergete.

Mamma kom uit toe meneer Loyola by mevrou Miller se werf inry. Sy lyk verras toe eers Bernie en daarna Clotilde uit die motor spring. Hildemara klim laaste uit, lighoofdig en naar. Sy waag ’n kykie na Mamma.

Die skoolhoof haal sy hoed af en hou dit in albei hande vas. "Kan ek met u praat, mevrou Waltert?"

Bernie is reeds op pad na die boord toe om Pappa te gaan soek, ongetwyfeld gretig om hom van die rit te vertel, en wat by die skool gebeur het. Clotilde staan langs Hildemara en kyk van meneer Loyola na Mamma en weer terug.

"Gaan speel, julle twee." Clotilde laat haar nie twee maal nooi nie. Sy laat vat agter Bernie aan, maar Hildemara bly weerloos staan. Mamma gee haar 'n vreemde kyk en forseer 'n vriendelike glimlag vir meneer Loyola. "Kom asseblief in, meneer Loyola. U sal op 'n bed moet sit. Ons het nie meubels nie. Kan ek koffie maak?"

"Nee, Mevrou. Ek gaan nie lank bly nie."

Hildemara sit met haar rug teen die pomphuis se muur. Mamma en meneer Loyola praat 'n hele ruk. Toe die skoolhoof uitkom, kyk hy om hom rond. Dan trek hy sy vingers deur sy hare, sit sy hoed op, klim in sy motor en ry weg.

Mamma kom nie uit nie. Hildemara kom moeisaam orent en loop oor die werf. Mamma sit op 'n bed, haar gesig in haar hande. "Ek's jammer, Mamma."

"Waaroor is jý jammer?" Mamma klink kwaad. Sy laat val haar hande op haar skoot en kyk op. Sy trek haar asem in, haar oë rooi en haar wange gevlek. "Wat het met jou knieë gebeur, Hildemara?"

"Ek het geval."

"Waar is dit nog seer?"

Hildie wys vir haar ma haar elmboë en hande.

"En dis al?"

Hildemara weet nie wat haar ma wil hê sy moet sê nie.

"Ons gaan daardie wonde moet skoonmaak, anders gaan hulle infeksie kry." Mamma loop om 'n emmer vol water te gaan haal. Hildemara het nie gedink dat haar dag nog erger kan word nie – totdat Mamma terugkom. "Dit gaan seer wees, Hildemara, en daar is niks wat ons daaraan kan doen nie." Sy gee Pappa se skeerriem vir haar. "Ons moet die klippies en grond uitkry en die seerplekke skrop voordat ons ontsmettingsmiddel kan opsit. Byt hard op die riem wanneer jy wil skree, anders gaan mevrou Miller dink ek is besig om my kinders te slaan."

Toe dit verby is, lê Hildemara uitgewas en leeggehuil op haar bed. Haar hande, knieë en elmboë brand soos vuur.

"Ons sal verbande opsit wanneer die wonde droog is."

Pappa kom 'n paar minute later in met Bernie en Clotilde wat agter

hom aantou. “Hoe voel sy?”

“Sy’s in ’n toestand!” Mamma se stem breek. Sy lig Clotilde se gesig en buk om haar te soen. “Ten minste het ons een dogtertjie wat weet hoe om terug te baklei!” Dan draai sy weg en gaan uit. Pappa gaan buitentoe en praat met haar. Toe hy terugkom, is Mamma nie by hom nie.

Hildemara lê op haar bed en kyk hoe Mamma wegloop. Sy het haar weer teleurgestel.

Clotilde loer om die tenthuis se deur. “Waar gaan Mamma?”

“Sy het ’n entjie gaan loop. Moet haar nie pla nie. Gaan julle twee ’n bietjie buitentoe. Alles is reg. Bernhard, maak seker dat sy nie naby mevrou Miller se rose kom nie.” Pappa tel Hildemara versigtig op sy skoot. Hy vee haar hare uit haar gesig en soen haar wange. “Mevrou Ransom is nie meer jou juffrou nie. Nadat jy en Clotilde weggehardloop het, het sy na meneer Loyola toe gegaan. Sy het haar werk bedank, *Liebling*.”

“Sy haat my, Pappa. Sy het my nog altyd gehaat.”

“Ek dink nie sy haat jou meer nie.”

Hildie se mond bewe en sy bars weer in trane uit. “Ek het vir haar gebid, Pappa. Ek wou hê mevrou Ransom moes van my hou. Ek het gebid en gebid en my gebede het niks verander nie.”

Pappa druk haar kop saggies teen sy skouer. “Jou gebede het jou verander, Hildemara. Jy het geleer om jou vyande lief te hê.”

# Chapter 20

**1924**

Papa heard about a farm for sale on Hopper Road, two miles northwest of Murietta. When he went to town for supplies, he came back the long way to see it; he talked to Mama about it. After seeing it for herself, Mama bargained with the bank over the property, but —"They wouldn't budge on the price, so I left."

"Well, that's it, then." Papa despaired.

"We're just getting started, Niclas. That place has stood fallow for two years. No one has made an offer. If we wait, they'll come around."

While they waited, Mama told Papa to make up a list of what he would need in the way of equipment and tools to work the farm, as Mama made up her own list of needed items. She went into town three times over the next week, but never set foot in the bank. She went again the following week, and the banker came outside to talk with her.

"He wanted to negotiate." Mama laughed. "I told him I'd done my negotiating. The place isn't worth any more than we offered."

"So? What did he say?"

"We can have it."

Both Mama and Papa went back two days later to sign the papers. They came home arguing. "We could've paid the full amount in cash and not had a mortgage."

"You have to spend money to make it, Niclas. We're not going to run up debt at the hardware store and the general store and the feed store. Let the bank carry the paper for a few years, not ordinary folks who work hard to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads."

Papa went out and bought a sorrel farm horse and sturdy wagon. He had just started dismantling the tent-house when Mrs. Miller came outside and said Papa had deserted her in her time of need. She said a decent man wouldn't leave a widow and her daughter to fend for themselves, then claimed Papa had no right to take what belonged to her, and he had better leave the tent-house exactly where it was or she'd have the sheriff after him.

Mama held her temper until the last demand. Then she stepped between them. "Now that you've had your say, I'll have mine." Papa cringed as Mama went nose to nose with Mrs. Miller. When Mrs. Miller stepped back, Mama stepped forward. "Ring up the sheriff, Mrs. Miller. *Please!* I'd like to show him all the receipts for everything

we've had to buy over the last two years just to keep a canvas roof over our heads. People ought to know how you and that lazy daughter of yours sit around all day doing nothing but stuffing your faces." For every step Mrs. Miller took backward, Mama advanced, hands in tight fists. When Mrs. Miller turned and ran, Mama shouted after her. "Maybe I'll post a notice in town. *Looking for work? Don't go to the Miller place!*"

Hildemara shook with fear. "Will she call the sheriff now, Papa? Will he come and take you and Mama to jail?"

Mama gave her *such* a look. "We're in the right, Hildemara Rose." She gave Papa a hard glare, too. "Scripture says a worker is due his wages. Doesn't it? It's about time the ox got his meal!" She pulled a stack of receipts out of one of the boxes. "And I have the papers to prove we haven't stolen one thing." She kicked her foot out. "Not even the dust!" She stuffed the receipts in her pocket and went back to packing.

When everything was ready to go, Papa and Mama rode on the high seat of the wagon, baby Rikki on Mama's lap. Hildemara climbed into the back with Bernie and Clotilde. They whooped like wild Indians as they drove off Mrs. Miller's place. Mama laughed. They stopped in town at the hardware store and Papa bought shovels, rakes, hoes, pruners, short and tall ladders, large and small saws, a bucket of nails, and sailcloth. He placed an order for poles, baling wire, and lumber to be delivered later. Mama went to Hardesty's, her own list to fill: a sewing machine, buckets of paint, brushes, and a bolt of yellow and green chintz.

On the way to the new place, the wagon bed piled high with all their purchases, Clotilde pressed in between Papa and Mama on the high seat, while Mama held Rikki. Hildie followed on foot with Bernie. When Papa turned in to the yard, Hildemara thanked Jesus she wouldn't have to walk any farther. She felt a rush of excitement at the sight of a barn, an open shed with an old plow, a windmill, and a house with a towering chinaberry tree in the front yard. A huge century plant grew on the opposite side of the driveway.

"All this belongs to us?"

"Us and the bank," Papa called back.

Hildie ran up the steps, but the front door had a padlock. The windows had been covered with plywood to protect them from vandals, so she couldn't see inside. She ran to the end of the porch. "An orange tree! We have an orange tree!" She didn't care that all the

fruit lay rotten on the ground.

"Hildemara!" Mama called as Papa drove toward the barn. "Help unload the wagon!"

As Papa handed tools down, Mama, Bernie, and Hildemara stacked them against the wall. Clotilde sat on the ground holding baby Rikka in her lap. Papa unloaded Rikka's crib and carried it to the back door of the house, where Mama and Bernie had stacked the folded cots. A huge California bay laurel tree grew thirty feet from the back of the house, its massive arms stretching leafy branches in a hundred directions.

Mama had the keys to the padlock. Papa took them from her. Then he took Rikka and handed her off to Hildemara. "Stand with your brother, Clotilde." He removed the padlock and tucked it and the keys into his pocket. Grinning, he scooped Mama up in his arms, shouldered the door open, and carried her inside. Muscles straining, Hildemara lugged Rikka up the back steps behind Bernie and Clotilde.

Papa set Mama on her feet. He gave her a quick, firm kiss and whispered in her ear. As he headed for the back door, Mama's cheeks turned bright red.

Hildemara stood awed. The house had one front bedroom, a large rectangular living room, a kitchen, and a potbelly stove. "It's so big."

Mama looked around and sighed. "I used to own a three-story boardinghouse with a big dining room and parlor." Shaking her head, she went to work. She took Rikka from Hildemara and jerked her chin at Bernie. "Help Papa bring in the cots. Hildemara, you can start sweeping out the bedroom. Start at the far wall and sweep toward the door and then out the front so it won't blow right back in again."

As soon as Papa brought the crib inside, Mama put Rikka down for a nap. Mama opened the door of the potbelly stove, took one look inside, and ran out the back door. "Niclas! I need a hammer to take the plywood off the windows, and you have to take the chimney pipe apart! It needs to be cleaned out or we'll have the house burn down over our heads!"

Papa came in with a bucket of coal. He'd found a bin full in the barn. When Mama finished cleaning out the stove, she started a fire. She left the door open to warm the house, warning Clotilde to stay away. Then she went to work scrubbing the kitchen. "We won't get it all done today, but we'll get a good start."

It started to rain before Papa and Bernie returned from looking over the property. They went right out again after lunch. When Rikka

awakened and fussed, Mama nursed her and then told Clotilde to play with her doll and keep Rikka entertained. Mama got on her knees and scraped hunks of congealed grease off the inside walls of the oven and dumped them into a bucket. "Who could cook on a stove like this? *Pigs!*"

When Mama finally finished, she built another fire in the cookstove. By then, Hildemara had finished sweeping and been put to work scrubbing the floor. "Back of the room to the front door, Hildemara. Don't start in the middle. Use both hands on that brush, and put your back into it!"

At last they could pump water into the kitchen sink and not have to tote buckets from a well. And the house was blissfully warm with two fires going. No more wind and rain coming in through canvas seams.

Papa and Bernie returned at dusk and hung their coats on hooks by the back door. Papa pumped water into a bucket and took it out to where he and Bernie washed in the cold January wind. Mama opened cans of pork and beans. "Find the plates in the trunk, Hildemara. Lay out the blue blanket and set things out. When you're done with that, put another shovel of coal in the stove."

Exhausted, Bernie sprawled in front of the potbelly stove. Edgy, Papa paced. Mama glanced over her shoulder. "How do things look?"

"Nothing has been pruned in years."

"Good thing it's winter, then. You can start now."

"Some of the trees are diseased, some dead."

"Anything that might affect the rest of the orchard?"

"I don't know." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll find out."

"If you have to pull out the trees, we can plant alfalfa."

"Twenty trees at the most, but alfalfa is a good idea. There's room enough to grow what we need for two horses in the strip of land alongside the road."

Bernie sat up. "Are we getting another horse, Papa?" His eyes gleamed.

"No." Mama spoke before Papa could answer. "We are not getting another horse. Not yet. We're getting a cow, and you and your sisters are going to learn how to milk her." She looked up at Papa. "You'll need to build a henhouse first thing. I'm going to buy a rooster and half a dozen hens."

"We can't do everything at once. The windmill needs repairs. I'll put up a shower house in spring. We can mount a tank on top. Good

reserve, and the sun will warm the water."

"Warm showers can wait. The cow and chickens come first. Milk, eggs, and meat, Niclas. We all have to be strong enough to work. I'll start laying out a vegetable garden tomorrow."

Papa and Mama took the bedroom. Baby Rikka in her crib and Hildemara, Bernie, and Clotilde on cots slept in the living room. Hildemara lay curled up as content as a cat in front of the fire, even with rain pattering against the roof and windows.

Mama came out of the bedroom just as dawn lightened the horizon. She swung her shawl around her shoulders and went out the back door, heading for the outhouse. Papa came out a few minutes later, pulling up his suspenders. He took his coat from the hook and went outside. Hildemara heard Mama and Papa talking outside the back door. Mama came back inside alone, bringing a rush of cold winter air with her. She started the fire in the stove and pumped water into the coffeepot. She opened the potbelly stove and stoked the fire.

"I know you're awake, Hildemara. Get dressed, fold up your cot, and put it on the front porch." Mama shook Bernie awake.

"Where's Papa?"

"Working."

And they would be, too, when Papa finished building the henhouse and hutches for the rabbits Mama wanted to buy.

* * *

It was a long, cold, two-mile walk to school, and it rained most of January. Bernie didn't care that his pant legs were caked with mud, but Hildie stood in line with her classmates, mortified and waiting for Miss Hinkle, the new teacher, to say something about her mud-soaked shoes and socks and the dirty hem of her coat and dress.

"I hear you have a new home, Hildemara."

"Yes, ma'am. It's on Hopper Road."

"Congratulations! That's a long way to walk in the rain. Take off your shoes and socks and put them by the heater." A few, like Elizabeth Kenney, had nice clean shoes beneath pairs of nice yellow galoshes they lined up by the door. Relieved, Hildemara saw she wasn't the only student who had shoes and socks to dry.

It was still raining when school let out. Hildemara felt damp to the skin despite the rain slicker and hat she'd kept pulled down over her head. Mama shook her head when they came in. "You look like drowned rats."

Hildemara sat silent through dinner, too tired to eat. Mama leaned over and put her hand against Hildie's forehead. "Finish what's on your plate and set up your cot. You're going to bed right after dinner." Mama scooped more potato and leek soup for Papa. "We need a table and chairs."

"We can't afford furniture."

"You're an engineer. You can figure out how to build a table and chairs and a bedframe. I already ordered a mattress from a catalog at Hardesty's General Store, and a sofa and two chairs."

Papa stared at her. "Anything else?"

"Two reading lamps."

Papa paled. "How much did all that cost?"

"The floor is clean, Niclas, but I'd rather eat at a table. Wouldn't you? It would be nice to have a comfortable place to sit and read in the evenings after a long, hard day of working in the vineyard and orchard." She cut off a piece of freshly baked bread. Slathering it with apricot jam, she held it out as though making a peace offering. "It isn't enough to just live inside a box with a woodstove."

Papa took the proffered bread offering. "Seems to me a lot of money is going out and nothing coming in."

Mama looked at him for a tense moment, mouth tight, but she didn't say another word.

For some reason, winter always made Mama pensive and quick to anger. Sometimes she would sit and stare into space. Papa would sit beside her and try to draw her into conversation, but she would shake her head and refuse to talk, other than to say January brought back memories she would rather forget.

Hildemara's birthday was in January. Sometimes Mama forgot that, too. But Papa would remind her, and she would go through the motions of celebrating. Long, cloudy days made Mama go quiet and cold like the weather.

* * *

A month after they moved onto the property, Papa mounted a big brass bell next to the back door. When Clotilde reached up to pull the cord, Mama slapped her hand and told her to listen to Papa. "This is for emergencies only," Papa told them in a grim voice. "It is not a toy. You ring it only if someone is hurt or the house is on fire. When I hear it, I'll come running. But if I come and find someone rang a false alarm, they'll have a very sore bottom." He pinched Clotilde lightly on the nose and looked from Bernie to Hildemara. *"Versteht ihr das?"*

“*Ja*, Papa.”

Hildemara lay in bed that night imagining all the terrible things that might happen. What if the potbelly stove caught on fire? What if Clotilde tried to put coal in and fell in headfirst? Hildemara smelled smoke. She saw flames coming out the windows and licking up the outside of the house. Crying out, she ran around the outside of the house. She tried to reach the bell cord, but it was too high. She jumped, but still couldn’t reach it. She could hear Mama and Clotilde and Rikki screaming.

Mama shook her awake. “Hildemara!” She put her cool hand on Hildemara’s forehead. “Just a dream.” Pulling her shawl around her shoulders more tightly, she sat on the floor. “You were crying again. What were you dreaming this time?”

Hildemara remembered, but didn’t want to say. What if speaking it aloud made it come true?

Mama stroked her hair and sighed. “What am I going to do about you, Hildemara Rose? What am I going to do?” Standing, she leaned down and brushed a light kiss against Hildie’s forehead. Pulling the blanket up, she tucked it in firmly around Hildie. “Pray God gives you better dreams.” She crossed the room and quietly closed the bedroom door behind her.

* * *

Papa hired four men to help him prune the almond trees and make burn piles in the alleyways between the rows. Then they went to work pulling up old posts and putting in new ones on which they strung wire. They pruned the vines and tied the healthy shoots, wrapping them so they wouldn’t freeze.

While Papa and Italian day laborers worked on the orchard and vineyard, Mama worked on the house. Every room got a fresh coat of yellow paint. The windows had flowered chintz curtains. The mattress, sofa, chairs, and standing lamps arrived. Her trunk became a coffee table. Papa built the bedframe. When he said he was too busy to make a table and chairs, Mama walked to town and ordered them from Hardesty’s catalog.

Papa put his head in his hands when she told him. She put her hand on his shoulder. “It cost less than if you’d bought the materials and built them yourself.” He got up and left the house.

Mama didn’t have much to say for the next few days. Neither did Papa.

“We should build a big porch bedroom along the back,” Mama

said over dinner.

"We're not spending another dime. It's going to be months before this place produces anything but weeds, and we have to pay taxes."

Not even Bernie talked after that.

Hildemara could hear Mama and Papa talking in low, intense voices behind the closed bedroom door. "Well, what did you expect? It would be easier having your own place?" Papa's voice stayed low, indistinct.

The next evening, Mama turned their world upside down. After grace, she scooped meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and carrots onto a plate and gave it to Bernie to pass to Papa. When everyone was served, she prepared her own plate. "I have a job at Herkner's Bakery. I start tomorrow morning."

Papa sputtered. Coughing, he put down his knife and fork and took a gulp of water. "A job!" He coughed again. "What are you talking about? A job!"

"We can talk about it later." Mama cut up meat loaf for Rikka.

Papa glowered at her through dinner. Mama cleared dishes and told Hildemara to keep out from underfoot. "Go and sit with Papa. He'll want to read to you." Papa always read the Bible after dinner. Tonight, he told them all to go to bed. Hildie watched and listened silently from her cot.

"Let me do them. You're going to break something."

"You're not going to work," he said in a low, hot voice.

"I'm already working. This way I'll get paid!"

He grabbed a wet dish from her hand, dried it, and shoved it in the cupboard. "We need to talk. Now!"

She wiped off her apron and tossed it on the counter, marching into the bedroom. Papa closed the door firmly behind him when he followed.

Clotilde started to cry.

"I've never seen Papa that mad." Bernie flipped over on his cot. "Shut up, Cloe." He put his pillow over his head.

Hildemara listened.

"What about Rikka? She's still nursing!"

"She'll come with me. I can nurse her as well in a bakery as I can at home. Hedda Herkner has a playpen she used for her son, Fritz."

"You didn't ask me."

"Ask you?" Mama's voice rose. "I didn't ask because I knew what you'd say. I talked to Hedda the day after Mrs. Miller told me she

expected me to cook and clean for her. I told her I worked for a bakery in Steffisburg. I can make tarts and *beignets* and—"

"Make them for your family!"

"I'll be paid by the hour, and we'll have as much bread as we need."

"No, Marta. You're my wife! You didn't even consult me before you went off and—"

"Consult you? Oh, you mean the way you consulted me before you left for the wheat fields?" Mama's voice kept rising. "You never thought enough of my opinion to ask for it! You thought nothing of signing my life away, first to Madson, and then to Mrs. Miller and her good-for-nothing daughter!"

"Keep your voice down! You'll wake the children."

Mama lowered her voice. "We need another way to bring in money besides farming. We all have to make sacrifices."

"Who's going to do the washing, the cooking, the sewing, the—?"

"Don't worry. The work will get done. The children are going to learn to pitch in. Bernhard, too! Just because he's a boy doesn't mean he can go off and do as he pleases while the girls do all the work. Someday he's going to be on his own. Until he finds a wife to take care of him, he'll have to cook his own meals, wash his own shirts and underwear and pants, and sew on his own buttons!"

"My son is not doing housework! You leave Bernhard to me. Do what you want with the girls."

"Isn't that always the way?" Mama's voice had a strident edge Hildemara had never heard before. "The son always comes first. Well, so be it, as long as Bernhard learns how to be a man and not a master!" Mama came flying out of the bedroom, throwing her shawl around her shoulders. The front door closed firmly behind her.

Hildemara sat up. "Go back to sleep, Hildemara." Papa went out the front door after Mama.

Hildemara chewed her lip, listening. She didn't hear footsteps going down the stairs, but she heard voices again. Papa spoke low. He wasn't angry anymore. She crept out of her cot and went to the front window. Papa sat beside Mama on the steps.

Hildemara crept back to bed and prayed until she went to sleep. When she awakened, Papa sat at the table, reading his Bible. He got up and poured himself another cup of coffee. Hildie shivered as she sat up. "Where's Mama?"

"She had to be at the bakery before dawn. She took Rikka. When

you have your lunch hour, Mama wants you to come to the bakery. She'll have something for the three of you."

When they arrived, Mrs. Herkner called out to Mama. Hildemara saw Rikki asleep in a playpen behind the counter. Mama came out of the back of the bakery wearing a white apron with *HB* embroidered on a pocket. "Oh, heavens, Hildemara! Didn't you bother to brush your hair this morning?" Mama waved them behind the counter and into the back workroom. "Sit right there." She gave them each a thick slice of fresh bread, a wedge of cheese, and an apple, then found a brush in her purse. Planting a hand on top of Hildemara's head, she brushed hard and fast while Hildemara tried to eat her lunch. "Hold still." Hildemara's scalp burned, but when she put her hands up, Mama rapped her knuckles with the brush. "How on earth can you get so many knots in your hair?"

"I'll do better tomorrow, Mama."

"You sure will."

When Hildemara arrived home from school, Mama got out her scissors. She took a chair and set it on the porch outside. "Sit down. I'm cutting your hair short. You can't go to school looking like you did this morning."

"No, Mama. Please." What would the other students say if she showed up with short hair?

"Sit down!"

Mama started cutting, and Hildemara started crying.

"Stop blubbering, Hildemara. Hold still! I don't want to make any more of a mess of it." Hunks of dark brown hair fell on the floor. Frowning, Mama looked her over and decided to cut bangs. "I need to even this side up." After a few more snips, Mama pressed her mouth tightly and fluffed Hildemara's hair on one side and then the other. "That's the best I can do."

When Mama turned to put her scissors back in her sewing box, Hildemara felt her hair. Mama had cut it all the way up to her ears! Sobbing, Hildemara fled to the barn and hid in the back stall. She didn't come out until Mama called her to dinner.

Bernie looked horrified when Hildie came in the back. "Holy cow! What did you do to your hair?"

Mama scowled. "That's enough, Bernhard."

Clotilde giggled. Hildemara stared at her resentfully. Clotilde still had long, curling blonde hair. No one would laugh at her at school.

Papa sat at the head of the table, staring at her. "What happened

to your hair, Hildemara?”

Hildemara couldn’t hold the tears back. “Mama cut it.”

“For mercy’s sake, Marta, why?”

Mama’s face reddened. “It’s not that short.”

Clotilde giggled again. “She looks like the little boy on the paint cans.”

Mama served Hildemara after Papa. “It’ll grow out in no time.”

Hildemara knew it was as close to an apology as she would ever get from her mother. Not that it helped. Her hair wouldn’t grow out in time for school tomorrow.

Just as she feared, the students laughed when they saw her. Tony Reboli asked if she had put her head in a lawn mower. Bernie punched him. Tony swung and missed. They started shoving each other around the playground. Miss Hinkle came outside and told them to stop at once. “What started it?”

Tony pointed. “Little Sis’s hair!” He laughed. So did others.

Miss Hinkle turned to Hildie. She looked shocked for a second and then smiled. “I think it’s very becoming, Hildemara.” She leaned down and whispered, “My mother used to cut my hair short, too.”

Hildemara took last place in the line of girls. Elizabeth stepped out of line and waited for her. “I like it, Hildie. I like it very much.” Hildemara felt a wave of relief. Anything Elizabeth said she liked, everyone else liked, too.

When break came, Clotilde went off to play on the bars with her friends. Hildemara sat on the bench and watched Elizabeth playing hopscotch with several other girls. Gathering her courage, Hildie walked across the playground. Heart thumping, she clasped her hands behind her back. “May I play, too?”

Elizabeth smiled broadly. “You can be on my team.”

That night, Hildemara lay awake, feeling euphoric. Mama sat at the kitchen table, the kerosene lamp burning, the stack of books on American history that she’d borrowed from the library sitting in front of her while she wrote a letter. Papa had gone to bed an hour ago. Bernie snored softly. Clotilde lay curled on her side, facing away from the lamp. Mama looked sad as she wrote.

Hildemara got up and tiptoed to the edge of light. Mama raised her head. “How was school today? You didn’t say much at dinner.”

Bernie and Clotilde usually dominated the table conversation. “I made a friend.”

Mama straightened. “Is that so?”

“Elizabeth Kenney is the prettiest and most popular girl in class. You can ask Clotilde.”

“I believe you, Hildemara.” Her eyes shone.

“Elizabeth said she’s always liked me. She wants me to go to church with her sometime. Would that be all right?”

“Depends on the church.”

“I told her we were Lutherans. She didn’t know what that was and I didn’t know how to explain. Her family goes to the Methodist church on Elm Street.”

“They probably think we’re heathens. I think you’d better go.”

“I’ll tell her tomorrow.” Hildemara climbed back onto her cot. Mama took up her fountain pen and began writing again, more quickly this time. “Mama?”

“Hmmmm?”

“Elizabeth said she liked my hair.”

Mama’s eyes glistened moist in the lamplight. “Sometimes all you need is one true friend, Hildemara Rose, just one you can depend upon to love you no matter what. You did well in finding one.”

Hildemara snuggled down under her blankets, feeling for the first time as though she had Mama’s approval.

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*After two years of hard work and living in a dusty tent, we finally have a place of our own. Mrs. Miller couldn’t cheat us out of the profits because I was on hand when the crops were sold and collected Niclas’s share before she could find a way to spend it on her worthless daughter.*

*Our place is two miles outside of Murietta, which is not too far for the children to walk to school. We have twenty acres of almond trees and twenty acres of wine grapes with an irrigation canal running along the back of the property. The house and barn are in need of repairs, but Niclas is already at work on fixing the roof. He fixed the windmill yesterday. I couldn’t watch, worried the whole thing would tumble down, him with it.*

*Hildemara is very excited about running water inside the house. She won’t have to tote water anymore. She gained some muscle from the work, which is good. She never complains. I push and she always yields, unlike Clotilde, who sticks out her chin and argues over everything. Even Rikka knows how to get her way. I hope for more fight from Hildemara. She must learn to stand up for herself, or*

*everyone will walk all over her. Niclas thinks I am harder on her than the others, but for her sake, I must be. You know what I fear the most. . . .*

* * *

Hildemara learned Mama was not one to let any opportunity pass by. After six months at the Herkners' bakery, Mama knew most of the people in town. But she took time on the long walk into Murietta to get to know people along Hopper Road.

"These people are our neighbors, Hildemara. And it pays to be neighborly. You listen, too, Clotilde. Always keep your eyes and ears open to learn whatever you can. If they need help, we'll extend a helping hand. It'll come back someday if we ever get into trouble."

Clotilde stopped kicking up the dust. "What kind of trouble, Mama?"

"You never know. And never visit empty-handed. Remember that most of all." One day she would drop off a loaf of bread to Widow Cullen, the next a bag of rolls to the Aussie bachelor Abrecan Macy, or a jar of strawberry preserves to the Johnsons.

"You need to get to know people, Hildemara. You can't be hanging on to my skirts forever. You, too, Clotilde. Let the neighbors get to know you."

"They know Bernie!" Clotilde grinned.

"Well, you and your sisters aren't going to be athletes. Rikka, stay with us." Rikka was hunkered down, studying a flower. She picked it and carried it along after them. "Everyone has something to teach you."

Mama tried to make friends with everyone, especially the immigrants. Greeks, Swedes, Portuguese, and Danes, even the scowling old Abrecan took time to talk with Mama when she came by. After the first few meetings, she bartered and bargained with every one of them. She traded chickens for cheese with the Danes and Greeks. She traded shelled almonds and raisins for lamb from the Aussie. When the milk cow dried up, Mama traded vegetables for milk from the small Portuguese dairy just down the road and traded the cow to the butcher as credit for meat.

Mama liked the Johnsons best of all. Swedes from Dalarna, they had hospitable ways, always offering a cup of coffee and a sweet while passing time. Mama liked their cozy red house with white trim. Clotilde and Rikka liked the profusion of blues, reds, yellows, and pinks surrounding it. Hildemara just liked to sit by Mama and listen to

the conversation between the two women. Carl Johnson and his two sons, Daniel and Edwin, tended the orchard of peach trees. Mama traded quince jelly for preserved peaches. One jar of Mama's quince jelly yielded four mason jars of Anna Johnson's peaches.

Hildemara always slowed when walking by the Johnsons' place, drinking in the rose scent. Mrs. Johnson was as fussy about deadheading her flowers as Papa was about getting rid of every weed on their property.

"Hello, Hildemara." Mrs. Johnson stood from where she had been thinning marigolds and brushed off her skirt. "Your mama already came by this morning. I was just putting on the coffee when she went by."

"Yes, ma'am. She goes in early Tuesdays and Thursdays to make the *beignets* and *Torten*."

"They'll all be gone by noon. She brought me cardamom bread last week. Your mama is a good baker. Is she teaching you?"

"I'll never be the baker Mama is."

"Mama's teaching me to sew." Clotilde leaned over the fence and pointed. "What are those, Mrs. Johnson? They're so pretty."

"Sweet Williams." She plucked a stem of bright pink and white flowers and handed them to Cloe. "Wait just a minute and I'll bring you some seed packets. You can start a nice flower garden for your mama, *ja*? If you plant the seeds now, you will have a nice summer garden. In fall, I will give you bulbs."

Mama had Bernie turn the soil around the front porch and prepare it for planting. "Not too much manure. It'll burn the seedlings." She and Clotilde planted lady asters, pink and white carnations, marigolds, hollyhocks, coneflower, and bachelor's buttons all around the farmhouse on Hopper Road.

Rikka liked to follow Mama around the house, holding the flowers Mama snipped. Mama would fill a mason jar with water and let Rikka arrange the flowers. Mama said it had symmetry, whatever that was. "I think Rikka could be an artist," Mama told everyone. She came home one day with a box of color crayons and let Rikka draw on old newspapers.

Bernie wanted to be a farmer like Papa. Clotilde wanted to be a dressmaker. At three, Rikka could already draw pictures that actually looked like cows and horses and houses and flowers.

Everyone assumed Hildemara would grow up to be someone's quiet, hardworking wife. No one thought she had any ambition to do

more than that, especially Mama.

* * *

Days passed in a blur of chores, school, study, and more chores, but every Sunday, Papa hitched up the horse and wagon and they all went into town to attend services at the Methodist church. Most of the parishioners had known each other all their lives. Some didn't like Mama because she worked for the Herkners, who had taken business from the Smiths, bakers who had been in Murietta for years.

"I wouldn't work in the Smiths' bakery if they paid me twice what Hedda and Wilhelm do. I went in there once and never went back again. The place is filthy, flies buzzing everywhere. Who'd want pastries from that place?"

Many of the men didn't like Papa either. Some called him a Hun behind his back. Those who had hired him the first year as a day laborer thought better of him, though. A quiet man, Papa didn't try to press his way in among people who viewed him with suspicion. Mama, on the other hand, lingered after services, talking to as many members of the congregation as she could.

Papa wasn't as easy with people as Mama. He didn't like answering personal questions, or mingling with people who liked to ask them. After a few months of trying to break into the tight circles, Papa gave up. "I won't stop you, but I'm not going back to church, Marta. I've got too much to do to stand around talking to people. And I can spend time with the Lord out in the orchard or vineyard." Papa flicked the reins.

"Even God took one day off a week, Niclas. Why can't you?"

"I'll rest on Sundays. But not there. I don't like the way people look at me."

"Not everyone thinks of you as a Hun, and those that do would change their minds if you'd make an effort to talk to them. You know more about the Bible than the pastor."

"You're better at making friends, Marta."

"We need to get to know people. They need to know us. If only you'd—"

"I'll stay home with you, Papa," Bernie volunteered a little too brightly.

"No, you won't. You'll go to church with your mother."

During lunch that day, Clotilde frowned. "What's a Hun, Papa?"

Mama put more pancakes on the table. "It's an insulting name for a German."

Bernie stabbed two pancakes before anyone else could get to them. “Who would want to insult Papa? He helps everybody who needs it.”

“Fools and hypocrites, that’s who.” Mama leaned over and forked one of Bernie’s pancakes onto Hildemara’s plate. “Try sharing once in a while, Bernhard. You’re not king of the roost. And put your napkin on your lap. I don’t want people thinking my son is a complete barbarian.”

Bernie did what Mama told him. “How long has the war been over, Papa?”

“It ended in 1918. You tell me.”

“Six years.” Hildemara answered with scarcely a thought. “I wonder whatever happened to Mrs. Ransom.”

Mama gave her an impatient look. “Why would you care what happened to that woman?”

Hearing the anger in Mama’s voice, Hildemara shrugged and said no more. But Mrs. Ransom stayed on her mind for the rest of the day. Hildie prayed her teacher’s grief had eased by now. Every time Mrs. Ransom came to mind, she prayed again.

# Hoofstuk 20

## 1924

Pappa hoor van ’n beskikbare plaas in Hopper Road, drie kilometer noordwes van Murietta. Toe hy dorp toe is vir voorraad het hy met die lang pad teruggekom om daarna te gaan kyk; toe praat hy met Mamma daaroor. Nadat sy self gaan kyk het, gaan onderhandel Mamma met die bank oor die eiendom, maar: “Hulle wil nie kopgee nie, toe loop ek.”

“Nou ja, dan is dit tot daarnatoe,” sug Pappa.

“Ons het nou maar eers begin, Niclas. Daardie plek het twee jaar lank braak gelê. Niemand het ’n aanbod gemaak nie. As ons wag, sal hulle na ons toe terugkom.”

Terwyl hulle wag, sê Mamma vir Pappa dat hy ’n lys moet maak van al die implemente en gereedskap wat hy vir die plaas gaan nodig hê. Mamma maak haar eie lys van benodigdhede. In die volgende week gaan sy drie maal dorp toe, maar sy sit nie haar voet in die bank nie. Toe sy die volgende week weer gaan, kom die bankbestuurder uit om met haar te praat.

“Hy wil onderhandel.” Mamma lag. “Ek het vir hom gesê dat ek my onderhandeling gedoen het. Die plek is nie meer werd as wat ons bereid is om te betaal nie.”

“En? Wat het hy gesê?”

“Dis ons s’n.”

Mamma en Pappa gaan twee dae later terug om die dokumente te teken. Hulle kom stry-stry by die huis aan. “Ons kon die volle bedrag kontant betaal het sodat ons nie met ’n verband gesit het nie.”

“Ons moet geld spandeer om geld te maak, Niclas. Ons gaan nie by die hardewarewinkel of algemene handelaar of die voerwinkel skuld maak nie. Laat die bank vir ’n paar jaar die las dra, nie gewone mense wat hard werk om kos op die tafel en ’n dak oor hulle kop te hê nie.”

Pappa gaan koop ’n rooibruin werkperd en ’n stewige wa. Hy het die tenthuis net begin afslaan toe mevrou Miller uitkom en sê dat

Pappa haar in haar uur van nood in die steek laat. Sy sê 'n ordentlike man sal nie 'n weduwee en haar dogter net so los om self te sien kom klaar nie. Dan beweer sy dat Pappa nie die reg het om te vat wat aan haar behoort nie, en dat hy die tenthuis moet los net waar dit is, anders gaan sy die polisie laat kom.

Mamma het haar tot dusver beteuel, maar nou tree sy tussenbeide. "Noudat jy jou sê gesê het, is dit my beurt." Pappa krimp ineen toe Mamma vierkantig voor mevrou Miller gaan staan. Toe mevrou Miller terugtree, tree Mamma vorentoe. "Bel die polisie, mevrou Miller. *Asseblief*! Ek sal hulle met graagte al die kwitansies wys van alles wat ons die afgelope twee jaar moes koop om 'n seildak oor ons kop te hou. Die mense behoort te weet dat jy en jou lui dogter die hele dag sit en niks doen nie. O ja, behalwe om te eet." Vir elke tree wat mevrou Miller retireer, gee Mamma een vorentoe, haar hande langs haar sye gebal. Toe mevrou Miller omdraai en hardloop, roep Mamma agter haar aan. "Dalk moet ek sommer nou 'n kennisgewing plaas. *Op soek na werk? Moenie na die Miller-plaas toe gaan nie!*"

Hildemara bewe van bangheid. "Gaan sy nou die polisie bel, Pappa? Gaan hulle kom en Pappa en Mamma in die tronk gooi?"

Mamma gee haar 'n kyk. "Ons het die reg aan ons kant, Hildemara Rose." Sy gee Pappa ook 'n stormagtige kyk. "Die Bybel sê 'n arbeider is sy loon werd. Dis omtrent tyd dat ons kry wat ons toekom." Sy haal 'n klomp kwitansies uit een van die bokse. "En ek het die papiere om te bewys dat ons niks gesteel het nie." Sy skop na die grond. "Nie eens die stof nie!" Sy prop die kwitansies in haar sak en begin weer pak.

Toe alles gelaai is, klim Pappa en Mamma op die hoë bankie van die wa, klein Rikka op Mamma se skoot. Hildemara klim saam met Bernie en Clotilde agterop. Hulle gil soos wilde Indiane toe hulle wegry. Mamma lag. Op die dorp doen hulle by die hardewarewinkel aan en Pappa koop grawe, harke, skoffels, snoeiskêre, kort en lang lere, klein en groot sae, 'n emmer spykers en 'n stuk seil. Hy plaas 'n bestelling vir pale, spandraad en hout wat later afgelaai moet word. Mamma gaan met haar eie lys na Hardesty's: 'n naaimasjien, emmers verf, kwaste en 'n rol geel en groen sis.

Op pad na die nuwe plek, die bak van die wa hoog gelaai met al hulle aankope, wurm Clotilde haar tussen Pappa en Mamma in terwyl Mamma vir Rikka vashou. Hildie en Bernie kom agterna geloop. Toe Pappa by die werf indraai, sê Hildemara dankie vir Jesus dat sy nie verder hoef te loop nie. Die opgewondenheid bruis in haar op toe sy die skuur sien, 'n oop buitegebou met 'n ou ploeg, 'n windmeul en 'n

huis met ’n hoë seringboom in die voortuin. Daar is ’n reuse garingboom aan die oorkant van die oprit.

“Is alles ons s’n?”

“Ons en die bank s’n,” roep Pappa terug.

Hildie hardloop met die trappies op, maar die voordeur is met ’n slot gesluit. Die vensters is met planke toegespyker om hulle teen vandale te beskerm; dus kan sy nie inkyk nie. Sy hardloop na die punt van die stoep. “’n Lemoenboom! Ons het ’n lemoenboom!” Dit maak nie saak dat al die vrugte oorryp op die grond lê nie.

“Hildemara!” roep Mamma terwyl Pappa na die skuur toe ry. “Kom help om die wa af te laai!”

Pappa gee die gereedskap aan sodat Mamma en Hildemara en Bernie dit teen die muur kan pak. Clotilde sit op die grond met Rikka op haar skoot. Nadat Pappa Rikka se bedjie afgelaai het, dra hy dit na die agterdeur van die huis waar Mamma en Bernie die slaapbanke neergesit het. Tien tree van die agterdeur af staan daar ’n groot lourierboom met massiewe arms wat lowerryke takke in honderd rigtings uitstoot.

Mamma het die sleutel vir die slot. Pappa vat dit by haar. Dan neem hy Rikka by Mamma en gee haar vir Hildemara. “Staan by jou boetie, Clotilde.” Nadat hy die slot oopgesluit het, steek hy dit saam met die sleutels in sy sak. Hy glimlag toe hy Mamma optel en dan druk hy die deur met sy skouer oop en dra haar binnetoe. Bernie en Clotilde volg en Hildemara dra Rikka moeisaam die trappies op.

Pappa sit Mamma op haar voete neer. Hy gee haar ’n vinnige, ferm soen en fluister in haar oor. Toe hy na die agterdeur mik, is Mamma se wange bloesend.

Hildemara bly vol verwondering staan. Die huis het een slaapkamer, ’n groot reghoekige woonkamer, ’n kombuis en ’n boepensstoof. “Dis so groot.”

Mamma kyk rond en sug. “Ek het ’n drieverdiepinglosieshuis met ’n groot eet- en sitkamer gehad.” Sy skud haar kop en begin werk. Sy neem Rikka by Hildemara en beduie met haar ken na Bernie. “Help Pappa om die beddens in te dra. Hildemara, jy kan die slaapkamer begin vee. Begin by die oorkantste muur en vee na die deur toe en dan voor uit sodat dit nie weer sal inwaai nie.”

Toe Pappa die bababedjie inbring, lê Mamma Rikka neer om ’n bietjie te slaap. Mamma maak die stoof oop, gee een kyk binnetoe en hardloop uit. “Niclas! Ek het ’n hamer nodig om die planke voor die vensters te verwyder, en jy moet die skoorsteen uitmekaarhaal! Dit

moet skoongemaak word as ons nie wil hê die huis moet afbrand nie!"

Pappa bring 'n emmer steenkool binnetoe. Hy het 'n konka vol in die skuur aangetref. Nadat Mamma die stoof skoongemaak het, maak sy 'n vuur. Sy los die stoof oop sodat die huis kan warm word en waarsku Clotilde om nie naby te kom nie. Dan spring sy aan die werk en begin die kombuis skrop. "Ons gaan nie alles vandag gedoen kry nie, maar ons sal 'n goeie begin maak."

Dit begin reën terwyl Pappa en Bernie uit is om die plaas te gaan verken. Hulle is net na middagete daar weg. Rikka is knieserig toe sy wakker word, en Mamma voed haar. Dan beveel sy Clotilde om met haar pop te speel en Rikka besig te hou. Mamma staan op haar knieë en krap hompe hardgeworde vet uit die binnekant van die oond en skud dit in 'n emmer uit. "Wie kan op so 'n stoof werk? *Varke!*"

Toe Mamma uiteindelik klaar is, maak sy nog 'n vuur in die koolstoof. Teen hierdie tyd het Hildemara klaar gevee en het Mamma haar aangesê om die vloer te skrop. "Van die agterste muur van die kamer na die voordeur, Hildemara. Moenie in die middel begin nie. Gebruik albei hande met daardie borsel, en werk met jou rug!"

Uiteindelik kan hulle water na die kombuis toe pomp en hoef hulle nie emmers van die put af aan te dra nie. En danksy die twee vure is die huis salig warm. Om te dink dat die wind en reën nooit weer by tentsome gaan inkom nie.

Pappa en Bernie kom skemer terug en hang hulle jasse aan hake by die agterdeur. Pappa pomp water in 'n emmer en neem dit uit na waar hy en Bernie in die koue Januarie-wind was. Mamma maak blikkies vark en bone oop. "Gaan haal die borde in die trommel, Hildemara. Jy kan die eetgerei sommer op die blou kombers uitpak. As jy daar klaar is, moet jy nog kole in die stoof gooi."

Bernie kom lê uitgeput voor die boepensstoof. Pappa loop onrustig op en af. Mamma kyk oor haar skouer. "Hoe lyk dinge?"

"Hier is in jare nie gesnoei nie."

"Dan is dit 'n goeie ding dat dit winter is. Jy kan nou begin."

"Sommige van die bome is dood, sommige siek."

"Enigiets wat die res van die boord sal beïnvloed?"

"Ek weet nie." Hy vryf oor sy nek. "Ek sal uitvind."

"As jy die bome moet uithaal, kan ons alfalfa plant."

"Twintig bome op die meeste, maar alfalfa is 'n goeie idee. In die strook grond teen die pad is daar genoeg plek om te plant wat ons vir die twee perde gaan nodig hê."

Bernie sit regop. "Gaan ons nog 'n perd kry, Pappa?" Sy oë glinster.

“Nee.” Mamma praat voordat Pappa kan antwoord. “Ons gaan nie nog ’n perd kry nie. Nie nou al nie. Ons gaan ’n koei koop en jy en jou susters gaan leer hoe om haar te melk.” Sy kyk op na Pappa. “Jy sal so gou moontlik ’n hoenderhok moet bou. Ek gaan ’n haan en ses henne koop.”

“Ons kan nie alles gelyk doen nie. Die windmeul het herstelwerk nodig. In die lente gaan ek ’n buitestort bou. Ons kan ’n tenk bo-op aanbring. Dis ’n goeie manier van water spaar, en die son sal die water warm bak.”

“Warm storte kan wag. Die koei en hoenders kom eerste. Melk, eiers en vleis, Niclas. Ons almal moet sterk genoeg wees om te werk. Ek gaan môre die groentetuin uitlê.”

Pappa en Mamma slaap in die slaapkamer. Baba Rikka in haar bababedjie en Hildemara, Bernie en Clotilde slaap op hulle opslaanbeddens in die woonkamer. Hildemara het haar opgekrul en voel soos ’n tevrede katjie voor die vuur, selfs met die reën wat teen die dak en vensters piets.

Mamma kom uit die kamer toe die horison lig word. Sy swaai haar sjaal oor haar skouers en gaan by die agterdeur uit na die kleinhuisie toe. Pappa verskyn ’n paar minute later, nog besig om sy kruisbande vas te maak. Hy haal sy jas van die haak af en gaan uit. Hildemara hoor Mamma en Pappa voor die agterdeur praat. Mamma kom alleen binnetoe, ’n vlaag koue lug saam met haar. Sy maak vuur in die stoof en pomp water vir die koffiepot. Daarna maak sy die boepensstoof oop en stook die vuur.

“Ek weet jy is wakker, Hildemara. Trek aan, slaan jou bed op en gaan sit dit op die voorstoep.” Mamma skud Bernie wakker.

“Waar’s Pappa?”

“Hy werk.”

En hulle sal ook, sodra Pappa klaar is met die hokke vir die hoenders en hase wat Mamma wil koop.

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Dit is ’n lang, koue, drie kilometer se stap skool toe, en dit reën amper die hele Januarie. Bernie gee nie om dat sy broekspype vol modder word nie, maar toe Hildie saam met haar klas in ’n ry staan, wag sy angsbevange dat juffrou Hinkle, die nuwe onderwysers, iets oor haar modderige skoene en sokkies en vuil soom van haar jas en rok gaan

sê.

“Ek hoor julle het ’n nuwe huis, Hildemara.”

“Ja, Juffrou. Dis uit op die Hopperpad.”

“Geluk! Dis ver om te loop in die reën. Trek jou skoene en sokkies uit en gaan sit hulle voor die verwarmer.” ’n Paar kinders, soos Elizabeth Kenney, dra mooi skoon skoene onder die geel rubberstewels wat in ’n ry langs die deur staan. Hildemara sien verlig dat sy nie die enigste leerling met nat skoene en sokkies is nie.

Dit reën nog steeds toe die skool uitkom. Ondanks die reënjas en hoed wat Hildemara laag oor haar kop getrek het, het daar van die nattigheid deurgesypel. Mamma skud haar kop toe hulle inkom. “Julle lyk soos versuipte rotte.”

Hildemara is stil aan tafel, te moeg om te eet. Mamma leun vooroor en plaas haar hand teen Hildie se voorkop. “Eet klaar en gaan slaan jou bed op. Jy gaan direk na ete in die bed klim.” Mamma skep nog aartappel-en-prei-sop vir Pappa in. “Ons kort ’n tafel en stoele.”

“Ons het nie geld vir meubels nie.”

“Jy is ’n ingenieur. Jy kan ’n manier kry om ’n tafel en stoele en ’n bedstyl te bou. Ek het alreeds ’n matras bestel uit ’n katalogus by die algemene handelaar, en ’n bank en twee stoele.”

Pappa staar na haar. “Nog iets?”

“Twee leeslampe.”

Pappa verbleek. “Hoeveel het al hierdie goed gekos?”

“Die vloer is skoon, Niclas, maar ek sal eerder by ’n tafel eet. Wat van jou? Dit sal lekker wees om ’n gemaklike plek te hê waar ’n mens in die aand na ’n lang dag se werk in die wingerd en boord kan sit en lees.” Sy sny die varsgebakte brood. Nadat sy dit met appelkooskonfyt beplak het, hou sy dit uit asof om ’n broodoffer te bring. “Dis nie genoeg om net in ’n boks met ’n houtstoof te bly nie.”

Pappa neem die aangebode offer. “Dit lyk net asof daar ’n klomp geld uitgaan en niks inkom nie.”

Mamma kyk vir ’n gespanne oomblik na hom, haar mond saamgepers, maar sy sê niks.

Om een of ander rede is Mamma in die winter altyd stil en meer liggeraak. Soms sal sy net die verte instaar. Pappa sal langs haar sit en probeer om te gesels, maar sy sal haar kop skud en weier om te praat. Al wat sy soms sê, is dat Januarie herinneringe terugbring wat sy graag wil vergeet.

Hildemara verjaar in Januarie. Soms vergeet Mamma ook daarvan. Pappa sal haar daaraan herinner en dan is dit asof haar verjaarsdag

meganies gevier word. Op lang, bewolkte dae is Mamma stil en koud, soos die weer.

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’n Maand nadat hulle op die plaas aangekom het, het Pappa ’n groot koperklok langs die agterdeur opgerig. Toe Clotilde haar arm uitsteek om die koord te trek, klap Mamma haar hand en beveel haar om na Pappa te luister. “Hierdie klok is net vir noodgevalle,” sê Pappa ernstig. “Dit is nie ’n speelding nie. Julle mag dit net lui as iemand seergekry het of as die huis aan die brand is. Wanneer ek dit hoor, sal ek dadelik huis toe kom. Maar as ek hier aankom en uitvind dat iemand vals alarm gemaak het, gaan hy of sy ’n baie seer sitvlak hê.” Hy gee Clotilde se neus ’n ligte knypie en kyk van Bernie na Hildemara. “*Versteht ihr?*”

“Ja, Pappa.”

Daardie aand lê Hildemara in haar bed en dink aan al die aaklige goed wat kan gebeur. Sê nou die stoof slaan aan die brand? Sê nou Clotilde wil kole ingooi en val kop eerste in die vlamme? Hildemara ruik rook. Die vlamme kom deur die vensters en lek aan die buitekant van die huis. Sy gil en hardloop agter om die huis. Sy gryp na die klok se koord, maar dit is te hoog. Sy spring, maar kry dit nie raakgevat nie. Sy kan Mamma en Clotilde en Rikka hoor skree.

Mamma skud haar wakker. “Hildemara!” Sy plaas haar koel hand op Hildemara se voorkop. “Dis net ’n droom.” Sy trek haar sjaal stywer om haar skouers en kom sit op die vloer. “Jy het weer geskree. Wat het jy hierdie keer gedroom?”

Hildemara onthou, maar wil nie sê nie. Nou-nou word dit dalk waar as sy dit hardop sê.

Mamma streel oor haar hare en sug. “Wat gaan ek met jou doen, Hildemara Rose? Wat gaan ek doen?” Sy staan op en soen Hildemara lig op die voorkop. Dan trek sy die kombers hoër op en vou dit knus om Hildie se lyf. “Bid dat die Here vir jou beter drome gee.” Sy loop deur die vertrek en maak die kamerdeur sag agter haar toe.

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Pappa huur vier mans om hom met die snoei van die amandelbome te

help en die takke in hope in die paadjies tussen die rye te pak om later verbrand te word. Dan haal hulle die ou pale uit en vervang dit met nuwes waaraan hulle draad span. Hulle snoei die wynstokke en nadat hulle die gesonde lote vasgebind het, draai hulle hulle toe sodat hulle nie doodryp nie.

Terwyl Pappa en die Italiaanse loonarbeiders in die boord en wingerd werk, werk Mamma aan die huis. Elke vertrek kry ’n nuwe laag geel verf. Die vensters het geblomde sisgordyne. Die matras, rusbank, stoele en staanlampe het gekom. Haar trommel word ’n koffietafel. Pappa bou die bedstyl. Toe hy sê hy is te besig om ’n tafel en stoele te maak, loop Mamma dorp toe en bestel hulle uit Hardesty se katalogus.

Pappa laat sak sy kop in sy hande toe sy hom vertel. Sy sit haar hand op sy skouer. “Dit sou minder gekos het as jy die materiaal gekoop het en self gebou het.” Hy staan op en loop uit.

Die volgende paar dae het Mamma nie veel te sê nie. Pappa ook nie.

“Ons moet ’n groot stoepkamer agter die huis aanbou,” sê Mamma een aand aan tafel.

“Ons spandeer nie nog ’n sent nie. Dit gaan maande wees voordat hierdie plek enigiets buiten onkruid oplewer, en ons moet belasting betaal.”

Nie eens Bernie het iets daarop te sê nie.

Hildemara kan Pappa en Mamma sag en driftig agter hulle kamerdeur hoor praat. “En? Wat het jy verwag? Dat dit makliker sou wees om jou eie plek te hê?” Pappa se stem bly sag, onduidelik.

Die volgende aand maak Mamma ’n aankondiging wat hulle wêreld omkeer. Nadat Pappa gedank het, skep sy ’n porsie vleis, kapokaartappels en wortels in ’n bord en gee dit vir Bernie om vir Pappa aan te gee. Toe almal bedien is, skep sy vir haarself. “Ek het werk gekry by Herkner se bakkery. Ek begin môre-oggend.”

Pappa verstik. Hy hoes terwyl hy sy mes en vurk neersit en neem ’n sluk water. “’n Werk!” Hy hoes weer. “Waarvan praat jy? ’n Werk!”

“Ons kan later daaroor praat.” Mamma sny Rikka se vleis in stukkies.

Vir die res van die ete gluur Pappa na Mamma. Mamma dek af en sê dat Hildemara onder haar voete moet uitbly. “Gaan sit by Pappa. Hy sal vir julle wil lees.” Ná ete lees Pappa altyd vir hulle Bybel. Vanaand stuur hy hulle almal bed toe. Hildie kyk en luister suutjies vanuit haar bed.

“Ek sal was. Jy gaan iets breek.”

“Jy gaan nie werk nie,” sê hy kwaad.

“Ek werk alreeds. Op hierdie manier gaan ek betaal word!”

Hy gryp ’n nat bord by haar, droog dit af en druk dit in die kas. “Ons moet praat. Nou!”

Sy vee haar voorskoot af, gooi dit op die toonbank neer en loop kamer toe. Pappa maak die deur ferm agter hulle toe.

Clotilde begin huil.

“Ek het Pappa nog nooit so kwaad gesien nie.” Bernie draai om in sy bed. “Bly stil, Cloe.” Hy druk sy kop onder sy kussing in.

Hildemara luister.

“Wat van Rikka? Jy borsvoed nog.”

“Sy kom saam met my. Ek kan haar net so goed in die bakkery voed as by die huis. Hedda Herkner het ’n speelkampie wat sy vir haar seun, Fritz, gebruik het.”

“Jy het nie vir my gevra nie.”

“Vir jou gevra?” Mamma praat harder. “Ek het nie gevra nie, want ek het geweet wat jy gaan sê. Die dag nadat mevrou Miller vir my gesê het dat sy van my verwag om vir haar te kook en skoon te maak, het ek met Hedda gepraat. Ek het vir haar gesê dat ek in ’n bakkery in Steffisburg gewerk het. Ek kan terte en *beignets* en – ”

“Maak hulle vir jou gesin!”

“Ek sal per uur betaal word, en ons sal soveel brood hê as wat ons nodig het.”

“Nee, Marta! Jy is my vrou! Jy het nie eens met my gepraat voordat jy geloop en – ”

“Met jou gepraat nie? O, soos toe jy met my gepraat het toe jy vir Madson gaan boer het?” Mamma praat nog harder. “Jy het nooit genoeg van my opinie gedink om dit te vra nie! Jy het niks daarvan gedink om my lewe weg te teken nie. Eers aan Madson, en toe aan mevrou Miller en haar nuttelose dogter!”

“Praat sagter! Jy gaan die kinders wakker maak.”

Mamma vervolg sagter. “Ons moet ’n ander manier buiten die plaas kry om geld te maak. Ons almal moet opofferings maak.”

“Wie gaan die wasgoed, die kosmaak, die naaldwerk, die – ?”

“Ontspan. Die werk sal gedoen word. Die kinders sal moet leer om te help. Bernhard ook! Net omdat hy ’n seun is, beteken dit nie dat hy kan loop maak wat hy wil terwyl die dogters al die werk moet doen nie. Hy gaan eendag op sy eie wees. Totdat hy ’n vrou kry om na hom te kyk, sal hy sy eie kos maak, sy eie hemde en onderklere en broeke was, en sy eie knope aanwerk.”

"My seun gaan nie huiswerk doen nie! Jy los Bernhard vir my. Maak soos jy wil met die dogters."

"Is dit nie hoe dit altyd werk nie?" Daar is 'n skril klank in Mamma se stem wat Hildemara nog nooit gehoor het nie. "Die seun kom altyd eerste. Nou ja, dan moet dit so wees, solank Bernhard leer om 'n man te wees, nie 'n meester nie!" Mamma kom uit die kamer gestorm en gooi haar sjaal oor haar skouers voordat sy die voordeur hard agter haar toemaak.

Hildemara sit regop. "Slaap, Hildemara." Pappa volg Mamma buitentoe.

Hildemara kou aan haar lip en luister. Sy het nie voetstappe by die trappies hoor afgaan nie, maar sy hoor stemme. Pappa praat sag. Hy is nie meer kwaad nie. Sy glip uit die bed en loop na die venster toe. Pappa sit langs Mamma op die trappe.

Hildemara gaan klim weer in haar bed en bid totdat sy aan die slaap raak. Toe sy wakker word, sit Pappa by die tafel en Bybel lees. Hy staan op en skink vir homself nog koffie. Hildie ril toe sy regop sit. "Waar's Mamma?"

"Sy moet baie vroeg al by die bakkery wees. Sy het Rikka saamgeneem. Wanneer dit langpouse is, moet julle na die bakkery toe gaan. Mamma sal iets vir julle hê om te eet."

Toe hulle daar opdaag, gaan roep mevrou Herkner vir Mamma. Rikka lê in 'n speelkampie agter die toonbank en slaap. Mamma kom uit die bakkery se kombuis te voorskyn. Sy dra 'n wit voorskoot waarop die letters *HB* geborduur is. "Hemel tog, Hildemara! Het jy nie hare geborsel voordat jy vanoggend by die huis uit is nie?" Mamma wys dat hulle na die werkskamer agter die bakkery toe moet gaan. "Sit net hier." Sy gee hulle elkeen 'n dik sny vars brood, 'n stuk kaas en 'n appel voordat sy 'n borsel uit haar handsak haal. Nadat sy 'n hand op Hildemara se kop geplant het, borsel sy met harde, vinnige hale terwyl Hildemara probeer eet. "Sit stil." Hildemara se kopvel brand, maar toe sy haar hande oplig, raps Mamma haar met die borsel oor die kneukels. "Hoe op aarde kry jy soveel koeke in jou hare?"

"Ek sal môre harder probeer, Mamma."

"Jy beter."

Toe Hildemara daardie middag by die huis kom, gaan haal Mamma haar skêr en 'n stoel wat sy op die stoep neersit. "Kom sit. Ek gaan jou hare sny. Jy kan nie skool toe gaan en lyk soos jy vanoggend gelyk het nie."

"Nee, Mamma. Asseblief." Wat gaan die ander kinders sê as sy met

kort hare daar opdaag?

“Kom sit!”

Mamma begin sny en Hildemara begin huil.

“Hou op kerm, Hildemara, en sit stil! Ek wil nie ’n groter gemors daarvan maak nie.” Klompe donkerbruin hare val op die vloer. Mamma kyk fronsend na haar en besluit om ’n kuif te sny. “Ek moet hierdie kant gelyk kry.” Na nog ’n paar knippe pers Mamma haar lippe saam en vat-vat aan die hare aan weerskante van Hildemara se gesig. “Dis die beste wat ek kan doen.”

Toe Mamma omdraai om die skêr in haar naaldwerkkissie te bêre, voel Hildemara aan haar hare. Mamma het dit tot by haar ore gesny! Hildemara vlug snikkend na die skuur toe waar sy in die agterste stal gaan wegkruip. Sy kom eers uit toe Mamma haar vir ete roep.

Bernie kyk met afgryse op toe hy Hildie sien inkom. “Wat de dinges! Wat het jy met jou hare gedoen?”

Mamma frons. “Dis genoeg, Bernhard.”

Clotilde giggel. Hildemara kyk met afkeer na haar. Clotilde het nog steeds lang, blonde krulle. Niemand by die skool gaan vir haar lag nie.

Pappa kom sit aan die hoof van die tafel en staar na haar. “Wat het met jou hare gebeur, Hildemara?”

Hildemara kan nie haar trane terughou nie. “Mamma het dit gesny.”

“Om hemelsnaam, Marta, hoekom het jy dit staan en doen?”

Mamma se gesig verkleur. “Dis nie só kort nie.”

Clotilde giggel weer. “Sy lyk soos die klein seuntjie op die verfblik.”

Mamma skep vir Hildemara nadat sy Pappa se bord aangegee het. “Dit sal weer groei.”

Hildemara weet dis die naaste aan ’n verskoning wat sy ooit van haar ma sal kry. Nie dat dit help nie. Haar hare sal nie betyds vir môre se skool weer lank wees nie.

Nes sy gevrees het, lag die kinders toe hulle haar sien. Tony Reboli vra of sy haar kop in ’n grassnyer gedruk het. Bernie slaan hom. Tony slaan terug en mis. Hulle begin mekaar op die speelterrein rondstamp. Juffrou Hinkle kom buitentoe en sê hulle moet onmiddellik ophou. “Wie het dit begin?”

Tony wys. “Kleinsus se hare!” Hy lag en die ander lag saam.

Juffrou Hinkle draai na Hildie. Vir ’n oomblik lyk sy geskok en dan glimlag sy. “Ek dink dis baie vleiend, Hildemara.” Sy leun af en fluister: “My ma het my hare ook altyd kort gesny.”

Hildemara gaan staan heel laaste in die ry. Elizabeth staan opsy sodat die ander kan verbygaan en wag vir haar. “Ek hou daarvan,

Hildie. Ek hou baie daarvan." 'n Vlaag van verligting kom oor Hildemara. As Elizabeth sê dat sy van iets hou, sal al die ander ook daarvan hou.

Toe dit pouse is, gaan speel Clotilde met haar maatjies by die klimraam. Hildemara gaan sit op die bankie en kyk hoe Elizabeth en 'n hele paar ander dogtertjies speel. Hildie skraap al haar moed bymekaar en loop nader. Met 'n hart wat swaar klop, hou sy haar hande agter haar rug. "Kan ek ook speel?"

Elizabeth glimlag breed. "Jy kan in my span wees."

Daardie nag lê Hildemara met 'n euforiese gevoel in haar bed. Mamma sit by die kombuistafel by 'n keroseenlamp met die stapel biblioteekboeke oor Amerikaanse geskiedenis voor haar en skryf 'n brief. Pappa het 'n uur gelede al bed toe gegaan. Bernie snork sag. Clotilde lê opgekrul met haar rug na die lamp. Mamma lyk hartseer terwyl sy skryf.

Hildemara staan op en loop op haar tone. Mamma kyk op. "Hoe was skool vandag? Jy het nie veel aan tafel gesê nie."

Bernie en Clotilde domineer gewoonlik die gesprek aan tafel. "Ek het 'n maatjie gemaak."

Mamma sit regop. "Is dit so?"

"Elizabeth Kenney is die mooiste en gewildste meisie in ons klas. Mamma kan Clotilde vra."

"Ek glo jou, Hildemara." Haar oë skitter.

"Elizabeth sê sy het nog altyd van my gehou. Sy wil hê ek moet een of ander tyd saam met haar kerk toe gaan. Kan ek maar?"

"Dit hang af watter kerk dit is."

"Ek het vir haar gesê ons is Lutherane. Sy het nie geweet wat dit is nie en ek het nie geweet hoe om te verduidelik nie. Hulle gesin gaan na die Metodistekerk in Olmstraat."

"Hulle dink waarskynlik ons is heidene. Ek dink dis goed dat jy gaan."

"Ek sal haar môre sê." Hildemara gaan klim weer in haar bed. Mamma tel haar inkpen op en begin weer skryf, vinniger hierdie keer. "Mamma?"

"Hmmmm?"

"Elizabeth sê sy hou van my hare."

Mamma se oë glinster traanblink in die lamplig. "Soms het 'n mens net een ware vriendin nodig, Hildemara Rose, net een op wie se liefde jy kan reken, ongeag wat. Dis goed dat jy so iemand het."

Hildemara krul haar behaaglik op onder die komberse. Vir die

eerste keer voel dit asof sy Mamma se goedkeuring wegdra.

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*Liewe Rosie*

*Ná twee jaar se harde werk en verblyf in 'n stowwerige tent het ons uiteindelik ons eie plek. Mevrou Miller kon ons nie uit ons winsgeld verkul nie, want ek was daar toe die plaasprodukte verkoop is en het Niclas se deel opgeraap voordat sy dit op daardie nuttelose dogter van haar kon verkwis.*

*Ons bly drie kilometer buite Murietta, naby genoeg dat die kinders kan skool toe loop. Ons het tien morg se amandelbome en tien morg se druiwe met 'n leisloot wat deur die eiendom loop. Die huis en skuur kort herstelwerk, maar Niclas is alreeds besig om die dak reg te maak. Gister het hy die windmeul reggemaak. Ek kon nie kyk nie, bang dat die hele ding met hom en al sou inmekaarstort.*

*Hildemara is baie opgewonde oor die lopende water in die huis. Nou hoef sy nie meer water aan te dra nie. Die werk het haar 'n bietjie spiere laat bykry, wat goed is. Sy kla nooit. Ek lok haar uit en sy is altyd toegeeflik, anders as Clotilde wat oor alles stry. Selfs Rikka weet hoe om haar sin te kry. Hildemara moet leer om vir haarself op te staan, anders gaan almal oor haar loop. Niclas dink dat ek harder met haar as die ander is, maar om haar ontwil moet ek wees. Jy weet wat ek die meeste vrees ...*

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Hildemara leer dat Mamma nie iemand is wat enige kans deur haar vingers laat glip nie. Ná ses maande in die Herkners se bakkery ken Mamma die meeste mense op die dorp. En wanneer sy die drie kilometer na Murietta toe loop, maak sy tyd om die mense in Hopperweg te leer ken.

"Hierdie mense is ons bure, Hildemara. En dit is lonend om vriendelik te wees. Luister jy ook, Clotilde. Hou altyd jou oë en ore oop om uit te vind wat jy kan. As hulle hulp nodig het, help ons hulle. As ons dalk eendag in die moeilikheid is, sal dit na ons toe terugkom."

Clotilde hou op om na die grond te skop. "Watse soort moeilikheid, Mamma?"

"'n Mens weet nooit. En 'n mens gaan nooit met leë hande kuier nie. Dis die belangrikste om te onthou." Die een dag neem sy 'n brood vir

weduwee Cullen, die volgende ’n dosyn rolletjies vir die Australiese alleenloper, Abrecan Macy, of ’n fles aarbeikonfyt vir die Johnsons.

“Dis belangrik om mense te leer ken, Hildemara. Jy kan nie vir altyd aan my rokspante vashou nie. Jy ook, Clotilde. Gee die bure kans om jou te leer ken.”

“Almal ken vir Bernie!” Clotilde glimlag.

“Nou ja, jy en jou sussies is nie sportsterre nie. Rikka, moenie wegloop nie.” Rikka sit op haar hurke na ’n blommetjie en kyk. Sy pluk dit en dra dit agter hulle aan. “Almal het iets om jou te leer.”

Mamma probeer met almal vriende maak, veral die immigrante. Grieke, Swede, Portugese en Dene. Selfs die nors ou Abrecan maak tyd om met Mamma te gesels wanneer hulle mekaar raakloop. Na die eerste paar ontmoetings word daar oor en weer ruilhandel gedryf. Mamma ruil hoenders vir die Dene en Grieke se kaas. Sy ruil gedopte amandels en rosyntjies vir die Australiër se lamsvleis. Toe die koei se melk opdroog, ruil Mamma groente vir melk by die klein Portugese melkery laer in die straat en gee die koei vir die slagter in ruil vir krediet vir vleis.

Mamma hou die meeste van die Johnsons uit Swede. Hulle kom oorspronklik van Dalarna af en is gasvrye mense wat altyd ’n koppie koffie en ’n soet dingetjie aanbied wanneer daar gekuier word. Mamma hou van hulle gesellige rooi huis met die wit rame en kosyne. Clotilde en Rikka hou van die malse bloue, rooie, gele en pienke wat die plek omring. Hildemara geniet dit net om langs Mamma te sit en na die gesprek tussen die twee vroue te luister. Carl Johnson en sy twee seuns, Daniel en Edwin, werk in die perskeboord. Mamma ruil kweperjellie vir ingemaakte perskes. Een van Mamma se flesse kweperjellie lewer vier flesse van Anna Johnson se perskes.

Hildemara neem altyd haar tyd wanneer sy verby die Johnsons se plek loop sodat sy die roosgeur kan indrink. Mevrou Johnson is net so ernstig oor die afpluk van dooie blomknoppe as wat Pappa oor onkruid uittrek is.

“Hallo, Hildemara.” Mevrou Johnson staan op van waar sy besig is om die gousblomme uit te dun en vee haar rok af. “Jou mamma is al vanoggend hier verby. Ek het net die koffie opgesit toe ek haar sien verbyloop het.”

“Ja, Mevrou. Op Dinsdae en Donderdae gaan sy vroeg in om *beignets* en *Tortes* te maak.”

“Hulle sal teen twaalfuur uitverkoop wees. Sy het verlede week vir my ’n kardemombrood gebring. Jou mamma is ’n goeie bakster. Leer

sy jou?"

"Ek sal nooit soos Mamma kan bak nie."

"Mamma leer my om naaldwerk te doen." Clotilde leun oor die heining en wys met haar vinger. "Wat is daardie blomme, mevrou Johnson? Hulle is so mooi."

"Baardangeliere." Sy pluk een van die helder pienk en wit blomme en gee dit vir Cloe. "Wag net 'n oomblik dan bring ek vir jou 'n paar pakkies blomsaad. Jy kan 'n mooi blomtuin vir jou Mamma maak. As jy nou die saadjies plant, sal julle 'n mooi somertuin hê. In die herfs sal ek vir jou bolle gee."

Mamma gee Bernie opdrag om die grond rondom die voorstoep te skoffel en te bemes. "Moenie te veel gooi nie. Dit sal die saailinge brand." Sy en Clotilde plant asters, pienk en wit angeliere, gousblomme, stokrose, koringblommetjies en botterblomme oral om die plaashuis in Hopperweg.

Rikka hou daarvan om Mamma deur die huis te volg met die blomme wat Mamma afgesny het. Mamma maak 'n fles vol water en laat Rikka die blomme rangskik. Mamma sê dit het simmetrie. "Ek dink Rikka kan 'n kunstenaar word," sê Mamma vir almal. Sy kom eendag met 'n boks kryte by die huis aan en sê Rikka kan op die ou koerante teken.

Bernie wil 'n boer wees, soos Pappa. Clotilde wil 'n kleremaker wees. Op drie kan Rikka reeds prentjies teken wat nogal regtig soos koeie en perde en huise en blomme lyk.

Almal aanvaar dat Hildemara eendag iemand se stil, hardwerkende huisvrou sal wees. Niemand dink dat sy enige groter ambisies het nie, veral nie Mamma nie.

* * *

Die dae vervloei in 'n waas van take, skool, studies en nog take, maar elke Sondag span Pappa die wa en perde in en gaan hulle almal dorp toe om die Metodistekerk se dienste by te woon. Die meeste van die lidmate ken mekaar al hulle hele lewe lank. Sommige hou nie van Mamma nie, want sy werk by die Herkners wat die Smiths se besigheid afgerokkel het. Dié is al jare in Murietta.

"Ek sou nie in die Smiths se bakkery gewerk het nie, selfs al het hulle my dubbel soveel as Hedda en Wilhelm betaal. Ek het een keer soontoe gegaan en was nog nooit weer daar nie. Die plek is vuil en vol

vlieë. Ek kan nie dink ’n mens wil enigiets uit daardie plek eet nie.”

Baie van die mans hou ook nie van Pappa nie. Sommige noem hom ’n Hun agter sy rug. Dié wat hom daardie eerste jaar as dagloner gehuur het, het egter ’n hoër dunk van hom. Stil man wat Pappa is, probeer hy hom nie op mense afdwing wat hom met agterdog bejeën nie. Mamma, aan die ander kant, vertoef ná die dienste en praat met soveel moontlik gemeentelede as wat sy kan.

Pappa is nie so op sy gemak met mense soos Mamma nie. Hy hou nie daarvan om persoonlike vrae te beantwoord of met die mense te gesels nie. Nadat hy ’n paar maande lank probeer het om sy voete in die gevestigde vriendekring te vind, gee Pappa op. “Ek gaan jou nie keer nie, maar ek gaan nie terug kerk toe nie, Marta. Ek het te veel om te doen om met die mense te staan en praat. En ek kan in die boord of die wingerd met die Here praat.” Pappa lig die leisels.

“Selfs God het een dag in die week gerus, Niclas. Hoekom kan jy nie?”

“Ek sal op Sondae rus. Maar nie daar nie. Ek hou nie van die manier waarop die mense na my kyk nie.”

“Nie almal dink aan jou as ’n Hun nie, en die ander sal tot insig kom as jy die moeite doen om met hulle te praat. Jy ken die Bybel beter as die leraar.”

“Jy is beter as ek met vriende maak, Marta.”

“Ons moet die mense leer ken. Hulle moet ons ken. As jy net – ”

“Ek sal saam met Pappa by die huis bly,” kom dit ’n bietjie te bereidwillig van Bernie.

“Nee, jy sal nie. Jy sal saam met jou ma kerk toe gaan.”

Gedurende middagete frons Clotilde. “Wat’s ’n Hun, Pappa?”

Mamma sit nog ’n paar plaatkoekies op die tafel neer. “Dit is ’n beledigende naam vir ’n Duitser.”

Bernie steek sy vurk in twee plaatkoekies voordat enigiemand by hulle kan uitkom. “Wie sal vir Pappa wil beledig? Hy help almal wat dit nodig het.”

“Dwase en skynheilige mense, dis wie.” Mamma leun vorentoe en steek haar vurk in een van Bernie se plaatkoekies en sit dit in Hildemara se bord. “Jy moet regtig leer om te deel, Bernhard. Niemand het jou koning gemaak nie. En sit jou servet op jou skoot. Ek wil nie hê mense moet dink my kind is ’n volslae barbaar nie.”

Nadat Bernie Mamma gehoorsaam het, vra hy: “Hoe lank gelede is die oorlog verby, Pappa?”

“Dit het in 1918 klaargemaak. Sê jy vir my.”

“Ses jaar,” antwoord Hildemara ingedagte. “Ek wonder wat het van mevrou Ransom geword.”

Mamma kyk ongeduldig na haar. “Hoekom maak dit vir jou saak wat van daardie vrou geword het?”

Die woede in Mamma se stem laat Hildemara net haar skouers ophaal en eerder stilbly. Maar mevrou Ransom bly vir die res van die dag in haar gedagtes. Hildie bid dat haar onderwyseres se smart teen hierdie tyd al minder geword het. Elke keer wanneer sy aan mevrou Ransom dink, bid sy maar weer.

## Chapter 21

**1927**

After three years of working the farm, Papa made enough money from the harvest to build a long, enclosed sleeping porch on the back of the house. He put in screened windows and a partition with a closet on each side. He built bunk beds for ten-year-old Hildemara and eight-year-old Clotilde, and a fold-down platform bed for Rikki—at five, still the family baby. On the other side of the partition, Bernie had a room to himself with a real bed and a catalog dresser. Mama ordered mattresses.

Hildemara loved the new bedroom until cold weather came. Even winter screens couldn't keep the chill out. Papa hung canvas on the outside and hooked it down through December and January, which made the room dark and cold. Mama came out the back door each morning after the potbelly stove had been stoked. The girls piled out of bed, grabbed their clothes, and made a mad dash into the house, crowding around the potbelly stove to get warm. Hildemara slept on the top bunk and always ended up being last and therefore outside the ring of warmth. While Clotilde and Rikka pushed at one another, Hildemara wormed in as close as she could, shivering until the heat penetrated her thin arms and legs.

"I'm going over to the Musashis' this afternoon," Mama announced one morning.

"Give it up, Marta. They like to stay to themselves."

"It won't hurt to try again."

The Musashi family owned sixty acres across the road, twenty in almonds, ten in grapes, and the rest in vegetables that changed by season, and not a weed anywhere. The barn, sheds, and outbuildings were sturdy and painted, as was the wooden post-and-beam house with sliding doors. Hildemara wondered where they slept seven children until Bernie said Andrew told him his father had built a dormitory for the boys and another for the girls, each with sliding doors into the living area and kitchen.

Bernie, Hildemara, and Clotilde saw the Musashi children every day at school. They had American names: Andrew Jackson, Patrick Henry, Ulysess Grant, George Washington, Betsy Ross, Dolly Madison, and Abigail Adams. Every one of them was a good student, and the boys impressed Bernie with their skill on the field. He had to work hard to be the best whenever the Musashi boys joined a game. The

girls were quiet, studious, and polite, but they never had a lot to say, which made Hildemara uncomfortable. She preferred to be the one who listened rather than having to think of things to say. Hildemara preferred Elizabeth's company. Elizabeth always had things to talk about—the latest movie she saw at the theater, visiting her cousins in Merced, riding in her father's new automobile all the way to Fresno.

Papa had finally made the first inroad when Mr. Musashi's truck broke down on the way back from Murietta. Papa slowed the wagon when he saw him tinkering with the engine and looking perplexed. He had a wagon loaded with lumber and a water tank for the shower house he planned to build, but didn't see any reason not to stop and see if he could help. Papa got the truck running enough to choke its way back up Hopper and pull into the Musashis' yard, where it died again. Papa called Bernie to tend the horse and put supplies away while he went across the street to the Musashis' place to finish the repair job. It took the rest of the day, but Papa fixed it. Mr. Musashi wanted to pay him, but Papa refused.

The next time Papa pruned the trees, Mr. Musashi showed up with his boys and equipment.

Determined to break down the rest of the barriers, Mama made apple *Streusel* and crossed the street for a visit. She came home resigned. "I give up. She can't speak English and I haven't time to learn Japanese. And I think she's too afraid of me to say much of anything anyway."

Only the "town kids" had time to play during the week, and when Saturday rolled around, the Musashi children had to spend all day at Japanese school. "I learn to read and write Japanese," Betsy told Hildemara on the way to school. "I learn old country customs, courtesies, and games."

"May I go with you sometime?"

"Oh no." Betsy looked embarrassed. "So sorry. Just for Japanese."

Bernie had no better luck getting the Musashi boys to teach him Japanese fencing.

Mr. Musashi struggled to sell his vegetables in the valley. One morning, he loaded his truck with crates of broccoli, squash, beans, and onions and drove away. He didn't return that evening. Mama told Hildemara to ask Betsy if the family needed any help. "No, thank you. My father is taking the produce to the Monterey markets. He won't be back for two more days. My brothers will manage." Mr. Musashi left Andrew in charge over Patrick, Ulysses, and George. Problems

cropped up like fast-growing weeds. A grass fire started down the road, threatening their orchard. Papa and Bernie ran with shovels to help put it out. When the water pump broke the next day, Andrew asked Papa for help. While Papa worked on the pump, Bernie asked if Patrick would show him how Mr. Musashi grafted the fruit trees.

"You should see them, Papa. They have three types of apples on the same tree! I'll bet we could do the same thing with the orange tree; graft in lemon and have lemonade!"

* * *

On the way to school, Hildemara saw Mama coming up the road from Murietta. She never came home this early. She always worked until two. "Is something wrong, Mama?" Face like stone, Mama walked right past Hildemara and the other children without saying a word. Hildemara ran after her. "Mama? Are you all right?"

"If I wanted to talk about it, I would have answered you. Go to school, Hildemara! You'll see what's wrong with me when you walk through town!"

She was right. "Holy cow!" Bernie uttered and half whispered to Hildemara, "You think Mama did it?" The Herkners' bakery had burned to the ground.

"Why would she? Mrs. Herkner is her friend." The children stood staring at the pile of blackened boards, broken windows, and ash.

Not even the town children knew what happened other than there had been a fire the night before. Hildemara spent the day wondering. Hurrying home, she found Mama in the washhouse.

"What happened to the Herkners' bakery, Mama?"

"You saw what happened. Someone burned it down!"

"Who?"

"Go feed the chickens."

"Mama!"

"Put feed in for the horses. And if you ask me one more question, Hildemara, you'll be cleaning the stalls."

Mama was finally ready to talk when everyone sat down to dinner that evening. "Hedda said someone threw something through the front window, and the next thing they knew, the place was going up in flames. They were lucky to get down the back stairs alive. Wilhelm thinks he knows who did it, but the sheriff needs proof."

Papa didn't say any names, but he looked as though he knew as well as Mama who would want to put the Herkners out of business.

"Hedda says they've had enough. They're leaving."

"Are they all right?"

"About as all right as they can be after seeing everything they've worked for go up in flames." Mama scooped beef stew into bowls. She served Papa first, then Bernie, Hildemara, Clotilde, and finally Rikka. She served herself last and sat at the foot of the table.

Papa said grace and then glanced at Mama. "There's a blessing even in the hardest things, Marta. Last harvest put us ahead. We have enough set by that you don't have to work anymore. We have enough to make payments and pay taxes." He forked a piece of juicy beef into his mouth. "Hmmmm . . ." He smiled. "I can tell when you've had more time to cook."

"That's all a man thinks about, his stomach."

Papa chuckled, but didn't add anything to Mama's comment.

Mama dipped her spoon in the stew. "Hedda and Wilhelm are going to San Francisco. They have friends there who can help them get started again. She's worried about Fritz missing more school." Hildie knew Mrs. Ransom had given Fritz a hard time, too. Unlike Mama, Mrs. Herkner had allowed her son to stay home from school whenever he felt sick.

Papa stopped chewing and lifted his head, sensing something in the wind. Hildie went on eating, pretending she wasn't all ears as Mama went on talking casually. "He was out of school for over a month with pneumonia. He's just catching up. If they take him out now, he'll lose the whole year. I told her we'd keep him."

Papa swallowed. "Keep him?"

"Bernhard has a big bedroom."

"Mama! He's not moving in with me, is he?"

Mama ignored Bernie's protest and spoke to Papa. "You'll have to build bunk beds like in the girls' room. We have enough wood left over, haven't we? I already ordered a mattress. It'll be delivered in a few days. He can sleep on the couch until then." She took a piece of bread and buttered it lightly.

Papa glowered. "I don't remember saying yes to this idea."

"You take care of the orchard and vineyard. I take care of the children, the house, and the animals, except the horse."

Hildemara felt the storm threatening family harmony. "It would be a good deed, wouldn't it, Papa? It would help the Herkners."

Bernie's face flushed in anger. "It's my room! Shouldn't I have a say if someone lives in it?"

Hildemara gaped at him. "His home just burned down, Bernie."

"I didn't burn it down!"

"They just lost everything!"

"Fritz Herkner can't even make a base hit! Last time he played basketball, he sprained an ankle. He has less coordination than you do! He's going to be about as much help around the farm as Clotilde and Rikka!"

"That's enough, Bernhard!" Mama slammed a fist on the table, making everyone except Papa jump. "Who do you think you are? If you don't make Fritz Herkner welcome in *my* house, he'll be sleeping alone in your room and you'll be living in the barn!"

Bernie stuck out his chin. "It's Papa's house, too."

"That's enough, *Sohn*." Papa spoke quietly.

Bernie looked suitably cowed, but Hildemara's stomach sank at the look on Papa's face. She knew Mama's money had bought the farm, but Papa worked hard and brought in the crops that made it all a success. Mama talked as though he hadn't contributed anything. She could feel tears welling at the hurt look in his eyes. She looked at Mama and saw the shame she tried to hide.

"*Our* house." Mama amended, but it was too late. The damage had been done. When Papa pushed his plate away, her eyes glistened. "She wasn't just my employer, Niclas."

Papa said something in German and pain flickered across her face. Tears slipped down Hildemara's cheeks. She hated it when her parents fought. She hated to see the hurt in Papa's eyes and the stubborn tilt of Mama's chin.

"When is he coming?" Papa asked.

"Tomorrow." Mama seemed to prepare herself before saying more. "Hedda is paying us. He'll stay with us through summer."

Papa's eyes flashed. "Is everything always about money, Marta? Is that all that's important to you?"

"I didn't ask for anything! Hedda insisted! I lost my job when the bakery burned down, and she didn't think I should be paying to take care of her son. She wouldn't leave Fritz otherwise!"

Bernie stabbed a hunk of beef. "Five months." He grumbled, slumping in his seat as he poked the meat in his mouth and chewed with a sullen scowl.

Mama turned on him. "They won't lower themselves to living in a tent and then slaving for some lazy widow. You watch, Bernhard. The Herkners will have a city apartment and successful business going before the end of the summer!"

Papa shoved his chair back and left the table.

Mama paled. “Niclas . . .”

Hildemara watched Papa go out the front door. She knew how hard he worked, how hard he tried to make Mama happy. And then Mama said some thoughtless thing to crush him. Hildie’s sorrow burned away in white-hot anger. She glared at Mama through her tears, wondering why she couldn’t be thankful instead of resentful. Hildie knew what it was like to try to please Mama, never measuring up to expectations. For once, she didn’t care. “Why do you have to be so mean to him?”

Mama slapped her across the face. Jolted back, Hildemara put a shaking hand to her burning cheek, too shocked to utter a sound. Mama had never hit her before; her face went white. When she reached out, Hildemara drew back from her and Bernie shot out of his seat. “Don’t hit her again! She didn’t do anything wrong!”

Mama stood, too. “Get out of this house right now, Bernhard Waltert!”

He slammed out the front door and pounded down the steps.

Clotilde stared at Mama, openmouthed. Rikka cried softly, her napkin covering her face. Blinking back tears, Hildemara hung her head. “I’m sorry, Mama.”

“Don’t apologize, Hildemara! Why do you always apologize, no matter what people do to you?” Her voice sounded ragged. “You clear up. You can wash the dishes and put everything away, too. You might as well get used to people walking all over you for the rest of your life!” Mama uttered a choking sound and went into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

Clotilde gathered the bowls. “I’ll help you, Hildie.”

“Mama might not like it.”

“She’s sorry she hit you.”

“Play with Rikki, then. Give her the crayons. Anything. Just make her stop crying.” Gulping down her own tears, Hildemara took over clearing the table.

Papa still hadn’t returned by the time Hildemara finished clearing the table and washing, drying, and putting away the dishes. Bernie came back inside. “He’s sitting outside on the porch.”

Hildemara tried to lighten the heaviness in the house. “If it was daylight, he’d be currying the horse.”

Papa always curried the horse when something preyed on his mind.

* * *

*It has been a bad time all around, Rosie. Someone burned down the Herkner Bakery and I am out of work. Niclas works hard, but it will be months yet before we see any money from this year's crop. Thus is a farmer's life. Drudgery and clinging to hope.*

*But that is not the worst of what's happened. After all this time, my girl speaks up to me and what do I do? I slap her across the face. I did it without even thinking. I had said something hurtful to Niclas, and he left the table, and Hildemara Rose exposed my shame.*

*I have never slapped any of my children in such a manner, and for me to do it to Hildemara appalled me. I wanted to cut my hand off, but the damage was already done. When I reached out to her, Bernhard told me not to hit her again, as if I would, and I sent him out of the house. Clotilde looked at me like I had grown horns. Perhaps I have. Rikka cried as though her heart had broken. Mine had.*

*And all Hildemara did was sit there with my handprint on her cheek. She said nothing. I could see the hurt in her eyes. I wanted to shake her. I wanted to tell her she had every right to scream at me. She doesn't have to sit there and take it! She would have turned the other cheek if I'd raised my hand to her again.*

*I have not cried so much in years, Rosie. Not since Mama and Elise died. I could hear Hildemara working in the kitchen, like a good little slave.*

*I have failed her in every way.*

## Hoofstuk 21

## 1927

Ná drie jaar op die plaas verdien Pappa genoeg geld uit die oes om ’n lang slaapstoep agter die huis aan te bou. Nadat hy gaasvensters ingesit het, bou hy ’n afskorting met twee kaste aan weerskante. Hy bou stapelbeddens vir die tienjarige Hildemara en agtjarige Clotilde en ’n opslaanbed vir Rikki – op vyf steeds die baba in die gesin. Aan die ander kant van die afskorting het Bernie sy eie kamer met ’n regte bed en laaikas. Mamma bestel matrasse.

Hildemara is mal oor die nuwe kamer totdat dit koud word. Selfs die luike kan die koue nie uithou nie. Pappa span ’n seil aan die buitekant en in Desember en Januarie word dit afgerol, wat die kamer donker en koud maak. Mamma kom maak elke oggend die agterdeur oop nadat die boepensstoof gestook is. Die dogters spring uit hulle beddens, gryp hulle klere en hardloop kombuis toe waar hulle voor die stoof staan en trippel om warm te word. Hildemara slaap op die boonste bed wat maak dat sy altyd laaste is en buitekant die kring van die warmte staan. Terwyl Clotilde en Rikka aan mekaar stoot, probeer Hildemara haar so diep moontlik inwurm, die ene bewerasies totdat die hitte haar maer arms en bene bereik het.

“Ek gaan vanmiddag ’n draai by die Musashi’s maak,” sê Mamma een oggend.

“Los dit, Marta. Hulle hou daarvan om hulle eie ding te doen.”

“Dit sal nie seermaak om weer te probeer nie.”

Die Musashi-gesin besit 30 morg aan die oorkant van die pad, 10 bestaande uit amandels, 5 uit druiwe, en die res uit groente wat met elke seisoen wissel, en nie ’n onkruid in sig nie. Die skuur, stalle en buitegeboue is stewig gebou en netjies geverf, sowel as die ruim houthuis met sy skuifdeure. Hildemara wonder waar hulle vir die sewe kinders slaapplek kry totdat Bernie sê Andrew het hom vertel dat sy pa ’n slaapvertrek vir die seuns en ’n tweede vir die dogters gebou het wat met skuifdeure na die woongedeelte en kombuis oopmaak.

Bernie, Hildemara en Clotilde sien die Musashi-kinders elke dag by die skool. Hulle het Amerikaanse name: Andrew Jackson, Patrick Henry, Ulysess Grant, George Washington, Betsy Ross, Dolly Madison en Abigail Adams. Hulle almal is goeie leerlinge en die seuns beïndruk Bernie met hulle vernuf op die sportveld. Hy moet hard werk om die beste te wees wanneer die Musashi-seuns aan ’n speletjie deelneem. Die meisies is stil, hardwerkend en beleefd, maar hulle het nooit veel te sê nie en dit laat Hildemara ongemaklik voel. Hildemara verkies Elizabeth se geselskap. Elizabeth het altyd baie te vertel – die laaste film wat sy by die teater gesien het, haar kuier by haar niggies in Merced, die rit in haar pa se nuwe kar Fresno toe.

Dis uiteindelik Pappa wat hulle bure se vertroue en vriendskap wen toe meneer Musashi se vragmotor eendag op pad huis toe breek. Pappa het die wa tot stilstand gebring toe hy die man moedeloos aan die enjin sien werk. Hy het ’n wavrag hout gehad en ’n watertenk vir die stortgeboutjie wat hy van plan was om te bou, maar het geen rede gesien om nie stil te hou en te kyk of hy kan help nie. Pappa het die vragmotor in so ’n mate aan die gang gekry dat hy Hopperweg kon uit en dit tot in die Musashi’s se werf gemaak het voordat hy weer gevrek het. Pappa het Bernie geroep om die perde te versorg en die voorraad te gaan bêre terwyl hy na die Musashi’s toe is om die herstelwerk te voltooi. Dit het die res van die dag in beslag geneem, maar Pappa het die vragmotor reggemaak. Meneer Musashi wou hom betaal, maar Pappa het geweier.

Toe Pappa die volgende keer sy bome snoei, daag meneer Musashi met sy seuns en hulle skêre daar op.

Vasbeslote om die res van die skeidsmuur af te breek, maak Mamma appel *Streusel* en loop oor die straat om te gaan kuier. Sy kom gelate terug. “Ek gee op. Sy kan nie Engels praat nie en ek het nie tyd om Japannees te leer nie. En ek dink in elk geval sy’s te bang vir my om enigiets te sê.”

Net die “dorpskinders” kom speel in die week, en die Musashi-kinders moet elke Saterdag na die Japannese skool toe gaan. “Ons leer om Japannees te lees en te skryf,” sê Betsy vir Hildemara op pad skool toe. “En ek leer van ou tradisies, gebruike en speletjies.”

“Kan ek eendag saam met jou gaan?”

“O nee,” keer Betsy verleë. “Ek’s jammer. Dis net vir Japannese.”

Bernie slaag ook nie daarin om die Musashi-seuns sover te kry om hom die Japannese skermkuns te leer nie.

Meneer Musashi sukkel om sy groente in die vallei te verkoop. Een

oggend laai hy sy vragmotor vol kratte broccoli, pampoen, bone en uie en ry weg. Toe dit aand word, het hy nog nie teruggekom nie. Mamma sê Hildemara moet vir Betsy gaan vra of hulle hulp nodig het. “Nee, dankie. My pa het sy groente na die Monterey-markte toe geneem. Hy sal eers oor twee dae terug wees. My broers sal regkom.” Meneer Musashi het Andrew in beheer van Patrick, Ulysses en George gelaat, maar probleme skiet soos onkruid op. ’n Grasbrand ontstaan laer af langs die pad en pyl reguit op hulle boorde af. Pappa en Bernie hardloop met hulle grawe om te help om die vlamme te slaan. Toe die waterpomp die volgende dag breek, kom vra Andrew Pappa om te help. Terwyl Pappa aan die pomp werk, vra Bernie of Andrew hom sal wys hoe meneer Musashi die vrugtebome ent.

“Pappa moet hulle sien. Hulle het drie soorte appels aan dieselfde boom! Ek wed ons kan dieselfde met die lemoenbome doen. En as ons eers suurlemoene inent, drink ons limonade!”

* * *

Op pad skool toe sien Hildemara vir Mamma van Murietta af aankom. Sy kom nooit so vroeg huis toe nie. Sy werk altyd tot twee-uur. “Is daar iets fout, Mamma?” Mamma loop met ’n klipharde gesig en sonder ’n woord verby Hildemara en die res van die kinders. Hildemara hardloop agter haar aan. “Mamma? Is alles reg?”

“As ek daaroor wou praat, sou ek jou geantwoord het. Gaan skool toe, Hildemara! Julle sal sien wat fout is wanneer julle deur die dorp loop!”

Sy is reg. “Sjoe!” kom dit van Bernie en dan fluister hy vir Hildemara: “Dink jy Mamma het dit gedoen?” Die Herkners se bakkery het tot op die grond afgebrand.

“Hoekom sou sy? Mevrou Herkner is haar vriendin.” Die kinders staar na die hoop swartgebrande panele, gebreekte vensters en as.

Selfs die dorpskinders weet nie wat gebeur het nie, behalwe dat daar die vorige nag ’n brand was. Hildemara wonder die hele dag daaroor. Sy haas haar huis toe en kry Mamma in die waskamer.

“Wat het met die Herkners se bakkery gebeur, Mamma?”

“Jy het gesien wat gebeur het. Iemand het dit afgebrand!”

“Wie?”

“Gaan gee die hoenders kos.”

“Mamma!”

“Gaan sorg dat die perde genoeg voer het. En as jy my nog een vraag vra, Hildemara, gaan jy die stalle skoonmaak.”

Toe hulle daardie aand aan tafel sit, is Mamma uiteindelik gereed om te praat. “Hedda sê iemand het iets deur die voorste venster gegooi, en toe hulle weer kyk, was die plek in vlamme. Hulle was gelukkig om lewendig uit te kom. Wilhelm sê hy dink hy weet wie dit gedoen het, maar die polisie het bewyse nodig.”

Pappa noem nie name nie, maar dit lyk of hy net so goed soos Mamma weet wie die Herkners se besigheid afgebrand het.

“Hedda sê hulle het genoeg gehad. Hulle gaan trek.”

“Hoe gaan dit met hulle?”

“So goed soos wat dit kan gaan nadat hulle gesien het hoe alles waarvoor hulle gewerk het in vlamme opgaan,” antwoord Mamma terwyl sy vir hulle van die beesbredie inskep. Sy bedien Pappa eerste, dan vir Bernie, Hildemara, Clotilde en dan vir Rikka. Sy skep laaste vir haarself en gaan sit aan die onderpunt van die tafel.

Pappa bid en dan kyk hy na Mamma. “Selfs in die donkerste tyd is daar seën, Marta. Die vorige oes het ons ’n hupstoot gegee. Ons het genoeg dat jy nie meer hoef te werk nie. Ons het genoeg om ons rekeninge en belasting te betaal.” Hy steek ’n vurk van die sappige vleis in sy mond. “Hmmmm ... ” Hy glimlag. “Ek kan proe wanneer jy meer tyd gehad het om kos te maak.”

“Dis al waaraan ’n man dink, sy maag.”

Pappa gee ’n laggie, maar sê niks.

Mamma laat sak haar lepel in die bredie. “Hedda en Wilhelm gaan San Francisco toe. Hulle het vriende daar wat hulle kan help om weer op die been te kom. Sy wil nie hê Fritz moet nog skool mis nie.” Hildie weet dat Fritz ook onder mevrou Ransom deurgeloop het. Anders as Mamma, het mevrou Herkner haar seun toegelaat om by die huis te bly wanneer hy nie lekker gevoel het nie.

Pappa hou op kou en kyk op asof hy snuf in die neus kry. Hildie eet en maak asof sy nie die ene ore is terwyl Mamma rustig verder praat nie. “Hy was meer as ’n maand by die huis toe hy longontsteking gehad het. Hy is net besig om in te haal. As hulle hom nou uithaal, gaan hy die hele jaar moet oordoen. Ek het vir haar gesê dat hy by ons kan bly.”

Pappa sluk. “By óns bly?”

“Bernhard het ’n groot kamer.”

“Mamma! Moenie sê hy gaan by my intrek nie!”

Mamma ignoreer Bernie se beswaar en praat met Pappa. “Jy sal

stapelbeddens moet bou soos in die dogters se kamer. Ons het nog genoeg hout, nè? Ek het alreeds ’n matras bestel. Dit sal oor ’n paar dae afgelewer word. Hy kan intussen op die bank slaap.” Sy smeer ’n lekseltjie botter op haar brood.

Pappa se oë word donker. “Ek kan nie onthou dat ek ja gesê het nie.”

“Jy sorg vir die boord en wingerd. Ek sorg vir die kinders, die huis en die diere, behalwe die perd.”

Hildemara kan die storm voel broei. “Dit sal ’n goeie daad wees, nè, Pappa? Dit sal die Herkners help.”

Bernie is bloesend van woede. “Dis my kamer! Het ek nie ’n sê oor wie daarin bly nie?”

Hildemara gaap hom aan. “Hulle huis het so pas afgebrand, Bernie.”

“Ek het dit nie afgebrand nie.”

“Hulle het so pas alles verloor!”

“Fritz Herkner kan nie eens tot by die eerste bof hardloop nie. Toe hy laas keer basketbal gespeel het, het hy sy enkel verstuit. Hy het minder koördinasie as jy! Hy gaan net so min met die plaaswerk kan help soos Clotilde en Rikka!”

“Dis genoeg, Bernhard!” Mamma slaan so hard op die tafel dat almal behalwe Pappa wip. “Wie dink jy is jy? As jy Fritz Herkner nie in mý huis laat welkom voel nie, sal hy in jou kamer bly en jy in die skuur!”

Bernie stoot sy ken uit. “Dis Pappa se huis ook.”

“Dis genoeg, *Sohn*.” Pappa se stem is sag.

Bernie lyk paslik oorbluf, maar Hildemara se hart krimp toe sy die uitdrukking op Pappa se gesig sien. Sy weet dat Mamma se geld die plaas gekoop het, maar Pappa het hard gewerk en die oes ingebring wat ’n sukses daarvan gemaak het. Mamma praat asof hy niks bygedra het nie. Sy voel haar trane kom toe sy die pyn in sy oë sien. Sy kyk na Mamma en sien die skaamte wat sy probeer wegsteek.

“Óns huis,” probeer Mamma vergoed, maar dit is te laat. Die skade is gedoen. Toe Pappa sy bord eenkant toe stoot, glinster haar oë. “Sy was nie net my werkgewer nie, Niclas.”

Pappa sê iets in Duits en daar flits ’n pyntrek oor haar gesig. Die trane loop oor Hildemara se wange. Sy haat dit wanneer haar ouers baklei. Sy haat dit om die pyn in Pappa se oë en die hardkoppige uitstoot van Mamma se ken te sien.

“Wanneer kom hy?” vra Pappa.

“Môre.” Dit lyk asof Mamma haarself voorberei voordat sy verder

praat. "Hedda gaan ons betaal. Hy sal vir die somer by ons bly."

Pappa se oë blits. "Gaan alles altyd oor geld, Marta? Is dit al wat vir jou belangrik is?"

"Ek het nie daarvoor gevra nie! Hedda het daarop aangedring! Ek het my werk verloor toe die bakkery afgebrand het en sy het nie gedink ek moet betaal om haar seun in te neem nie. Sy sou Fritz andersins nie hier laat bly nie!"

Bernie steek sy vurk in 'n stuk vleis. "Vyf maande." Hy mompel toe hy die vleis in sy mond druk en langtand kou.

Mamma draai na hom. "Hulle is nie bereid om hulleself te verneder en in 'n tent te gaan bly en vir een of ander lui weduwee te werk nie. Kyk maar, Bernhard. Die Herkners gaan voor die einde van die somer 'n huis en 'n suksesvolle besigheid hê!"

Pappa stoot sy stoel terug en staan op.

Mamma verbleek. "Niclas ... "

Hildemara kyk hoe Pappa by die voordeur uitgaan. Sy weet hoe hard hy werk, hoe hard hy probeer om Mamma gelukkig te maak. En dan praat Mamma sonder om te dink en kruisig hom met haar woorde. Hildie se hartseer word deur 'n witwarm woede weggebrand. Sy gluur deur haar trane na Mamma. Hoekom kan sy nie dankbaar in plaas van onvergenoegd wees nie? Hildie weet hoe dit voel om te probeer om Mamma tevrede te stel en nooit heeltemal daarin te slaag nie. Vir 'n verandering gee sy nie om nie. "Hoekom moet Mamma so lelik wees met hom?"

Mamma klap haar deur die gesig. Hildemara ruk terug en plaas 'n bewende hand oor haar brandende wang, te geskok om 'n geluid te maak. Mamma het haar nog nooit geslaan nie en haar gesig word wit. Toe sy haar hand uitsteek, deins Hildemara terug en Bernie spring op. "Moet haar nie weer slaan nie! Sy het niks gedoen nie!"

Mamma staan ook op. "Maak dat jy uit hierdie huis kom, Bernhard Waltert!"

Hy klap die voordeur agter hom toe en storm by die trappies af.

Clotilde staar Mamma oopmond aan. Rikka huil saggies, haar servet oor haar gesig. Hildemara knip haar oë teen haar trane en laat sak haar kop. "Ek's jammer, Mamma."

"Moenie jammer sê nie, Hildemara! Hoekom maak jy altyd verskoning, maak nie saak wat mense aan jou doen nie?" Haar stem kom rukkerig uit. "Dek af. Jy kan sommer ook skottelgoed was en alles wegpak. Jy kan netsowel daaraan gewoond raak dat mense vir die res van jou lewe oor jou loop!" Dit klink of Mamma wil stik en sy

klap die deur agter haar toe toe sy kamer toe gaan.

Clotilde maak die borde bymekaar. "Ek sal jou help, Hildie."

"Mamma gaan dalk nie daarvan hou nie."

"Sy's jammer dat sy jou geslaan het."

"Gaan speel dan met Rikki. Gee vir haar die kryte. Enigiets om haar te laat ophou huil." Hildemara sluk haar trane terug terwyl sy verder afdek.

Teen die tyd dat Hildemara klaar afgedek het en die skottelgoed gewas is, nadat sy alles afgedroog en weggepak het, het Pappa nog nie teruggekom nie. Bernie kom weer binnetoe. "Hy sit buitekant op die stoep."

Hildemara probeer die swaarheid in die huis lig. "As dit lig was, sou hy die perd geroskam het."

Pappa roskam altyd die perd wanneer iets hom pla.

***

*Dit was in alle opsigte 'n aaklige tyd, Rosie. Iemand het die Herkners se bakkery afgebrand en ek het nie meer 'n werk nie. Niclas werk hard, maar dit gaan maande wees voordat hierdie jaar se oes enige geld inbring. Dit is hoe dit met die plaaslewe gaan. 'n Mens sloof jou af en jy hoop.*

*Maar dis nie die ergste wat gebeur het nie. Ná al die jare praat my dogter terug en wat doen ek? Ek klap haar deur die gesig. Ek het dit gedoen sonder om te dink. Ek het iets gemeens vir Niclas gesê en hy het uitgeloop, en Hildemara Rose het my gekonfronteer.*

*Ek het nog nooit een van my kinders op só 'n manier geklap nie, en dit walg my dat ek dit aan Hildemara gedoen het. Ek wou my hand afkap, maar die skade was reeds gedoen. Toe ek aan haar wou raak, het Bernie gesê dat ek haar nie weer moet slaan nie, so asof ek sou, en ek het hom uitgejaag. Clotilde het na my gekyk asof ek horings gekry het. Dalk het ek. Rikka het gehuil asof haar hart gebreek het. Myne het.*

*En al wat Hildemara gedoen het, was om met my vingermerke op haar wang te bly sit. Sy het niks gesê nie. Ek kon die pyn in haar oë sien. Ek wou haar skud. Ek wou vir haar sê dat sy die volste reg gehad het om op my te skree. Sy hoef nie daar te sit en dit op te vreet nie! Sy sou die ander wang gedraai het as ek weer my hand teen haar gelig het.*

*Ek het jare laas so baie gehuil, Rosie. Nie sedert Mamma en Elise dood is nie. Ek kon Hildemara in die kombuis hoor werk, soos 'n goeie*

*klein slafie.*

*Ek het haar in alle opsigte gefaal.*

## Chapter 22

Mama went to town the next morning, pushing Rikki in the wheelbarrow. Fritz Herkner didn't show up at school. When Hildemara came home that afternoon, she found Fritz sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of milk and a plate of cookies in front of him. He looked sallow and miserable, his brown hair a little too long and a little too much meat on his bones. Hildemara felt sorry for him, but not sorry enough to sit at the table and have Mama within arm's reach.

"I'm sorry about your home burning down, Fritz." Fritz didn't look up. His mouth worked and tears spilled down his cheeks. Mama patted his hand and gave Hildemara a jerk of the head, enough to tell her she wasn't wanted. She went to her bedroom and did her homework on the top bunk.

Mama called Bernie inside and told him to take Fritz out for a look around the place. "Show him the orchard and vineyard. Take him over to the irrigation ditch. Do you like chickens, Fritz? No? How about rabbits?" Bernie led Fritz through the porch screen door, letting it bang behind him. Clotilde went out after them.

Hildie overheard Mama talking to Papa in the kitchen later. "Hedda said he's very intelligent."

"Is he?"

"I don't know yet. She said he likes books. So I picked up a few at the library. I couldn't get him to talk about anything on the way home. He cried all the way. He's worse than Hildemara with the tears. Of course, Hedda wasn't much better. She cried harder than he did when we saw them off at the train station. We need to toughen up this boy."

"If Hedda was that upset, they'll probably come back for him in a week."

Fritz ate hardly anything the first three days, even though Mama fixed *Hasenpfeffer*, *Sauerbraten*, and *Wiener Schnitzel*. Bernie said Fritz cried himself to sleep at night. "I hope he stops pretty soon or I'm going to strangle him!"

Hildemara defended him. "How would you feel if our house burned down and Mama and Papa had to leave you behind while they went away to San Francisco?"

"Let me think." Bernie grinned. "I'd be free of chores and could do anything I wanted!"

"I know what it's like not to have a friend, Bernie. It's even worse when someone is always picking on you. He's our summer brother. We have to be nice to him."

A letter arrived from San Francisco a week after the Herkners left. Fritz cried when he opened it. He cried all through dinner. Bernie rolled his eyes and ate Fritz's share of potato dumplings.

When Hildemara leaned over to say some comforting words, Mama shook her head and looked so fierce, Hildie left Fritz alone. Papa called everyone into the living room and read the Bible. Fritz sat on the sofa, staring out the window until the sun went down.

Letters flew back and forth every few days. Every letter brought Fritz down into the doldrums again. "He needs chores to take his mind off his troubles." Mama sent Fritz out with Hildemara to feed the chickens. When the rooster came after him, Fritz ran screaming from the henhouse, leaving the door open long enough for the rooster to slip through and have three hens chasing after him. It took Hildemara an hour to catch them, and then she had to walk to school alone and explain to Miss Hinkle what happened.

"He can muck the stable," Bernie suggested to Mama. "Might get rid of some of that baby fat he's carrying around."

Mama put Fritz in charge of the rabbits instead. Fritz stopped crying. He stopped waiting at the mailbox for his mother's letters. Hildemara worried about what would happen when Mama decided to make *Hasenpfeffer* again, but it seemed Mama had already thought of that, too. "We only have one rule about the rabbits, Fritz. You can't name them."

"Not even one?"

"No. Not even one."

Luckily, they were all white. If one went missing, it wouldn't matter as much if he didn't know it personally.

Mrs. Herkner's letters still came every few days, but Fritz didn't write back more than once a week. Sometimes he went longer than that and Mama would get a letter from Hedda. "Time to write a letter to your mother, Fritz."

Hildemara envied Fritz his doting mother. She knew Mama would never miss her so much. She kept asking what Hildemara wanted to do with her life, as though she couldn't wait for Hildie to grow up and leave home.

* * *

By the time school ended, Fritz had more than settled in. He'd

started infecting Bernie with new ideas gleaned from the books he read. “Can we build a tree house, Papa? one like in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?”

Mama didn’t think much of the idea. “Papa has enough to do. If anyone builds anything, it’s going to be you boys.”

Papa didn’t trust them with good lumber. “They’d just waste it.” He told Bernie and Fritz to draw up the plans. He’d do the measuring and marking; they could do the sawing. By the end of the first day of hard work, they came in with palms looking like raw meat and broad grins on their faces.

“We need a trapdoor to keep enemies out.” *Enemies* being Hildemara, Clotilde, and Rikka, of course. “We can use a rope ladder and pull it up once we’re on the platform.”

Papa joined in the fun of building, adding a second smaller, higher platform as a watchtower with a ladder and trapdoor. He built a bench around the inside wall of the large platform ten feet above ground. “So you boys won’t fall asleep and roll off. We can’t have you breaking your necks.”

Tony Reboli, Wallie Engles, and Eddie Rinckel came out to help. Hildemara sat on the back steps watching them. They looked like a bunch of monkeys climbing around in the big bay tree. She wished she could be part of the fun, too, but Bernie told her, “No girls allowed.” Clotilde didn’t care. She was too busy cutting out a new dress and learning how to use Mama’s sewing machine. And Rikka liked to stay inside the house, sitting at the kitchen table drawing pictures and adding Crayola color. Hildemara wished Elizabeth could come over and play, but her one friend had gone to Merced to spend the summer with cousins.

“Abrecan Macy sold his place.” Mama told Papa over dinner. “Another bachelor, I guess. He’s from back east. Abrecan doesn’t know anything about him other than he had enough to take over the place. He didn’t say what the man plans to do with it.”

“It’s his business, isn’t it?”

“His land butts up against ours. We ought to know something about him. Seems odd, doesn’t it? Come all the way out here to buy a place and not have any plans for it. His name is Kimball. Abrecan couldn’t remember his first name.”

Mama took the new neighbor a loaf of fresh cinnamon raisin bread. “He’s not very friendly. He took the bread and closed the door in my face.”

“Maybe he wants to be left alone.”

“I didn’t like his eyes.”

July turned hot, melting the macadam. The boys dared one another to stand in the hot black tar to see how long they could bear boiling the bottoms of their feet. After a few weeks of running around barefoot, it wasn’t a challenge anymore, and Fritz invented a new game of daring: standing on a red ant hill, while someone stood by with a hose. Fritz barely lasted ten seconds and had ant bites up to his ankles. Eddie, Tony, and Wallie did better, but no one did as well as Bernie, determined to win every game he ever played. Gritting his teeth against the painful bites, he stood until the ants bit their way up his thigh before jumping off the mound and yelling for Eddie to blast him with the hose. A few tenacious survivors managed to crawl into his underpants. Bernie started screaming and hopping around. Mama came running out the front door. Bernie finally grabbed the hose from Eddie and took care of business himself while Mama stood on the porch, hands on her hips, laughing. “Serves you right for being such a fool!”

Hildemara followed the boys to the irrigation ditch, where they swam. Bernie had taught Fritz to swim. She wanted to learn, too. “Just get in!” Bernie yelled at her. “Move your arms and kick your feet and stay away from us. We don’t want any stupid girls around!” Hildemara slid into the water cautiously. It felt wonderfully cool in the heat of the day. When she touched the bottom, slime covered her feet and slithery weeds encircled her ankles like snakes in the slow current. She treaded carefully along the side, arms in the air. Something big and dark moved behind the bamboo stand on the other side of the ditch, startling her. When she called out and pointed, Bernie made fun of her again.

“Oooooh, Hildie see a bogeyman!” The other boys joined in. “Come on!” With his long legs, Bernie climbed easily out of the ditch. “Let’s go over to the Grand Junction. The water’s deeper there. This ditch is for babies!” Grand Junction was the big cement irrigation ditch that spilled water into the smaller ones running between the farms a quarter mile from theirs.

“Bernie! Wait!”

“No girls allowed!” Bernie yelled over his shoulder as he took off along the ditch, the others racing after him.

Hildemara kept wading carefully, trying to build her confidence. She saw movement behind the stalks of bamboo again, and she

climbed quickly out of the water. Heart pounding, she looked across the irrigation ditch and tried to see what stood there. Nothing moved. The beads of water dried quickly on her skin. She could hear Bernie and the boys laughing and shouting at one another farther down the ditch. Their voices drifted as the distance widened. She wasn't ready to try anything deeper than this ditch, and the boys wouldn't welcome her anyway.

Still feeling uneasy, Hildemara sat on the edge of the ditch and put her feet in the water. Her skin prickled with the sensation of being watched, but nothing moved. Bernie and the others were across the road by now. She couldn't hear the boys anymore. It was so quiet.

The sun baked her shoulders and back. Her clothes dried quickly. Her legs burned in the heat. She slipped carefully back into the water, cold after the heat, and lowered herself until it lapped up around her neck. She moved her arms back and forth just under the surface. Gathering her nerve, she lifted her feet and promptly slipped beneath the surface. She stood quickly, sputtering and wiping the water from her eyes.

"Careful there. You could drown."

Heart lurching, she looked up at a man standing on the bank. He looked bigger than Papa above her, but didn't wear coveralls. He looked like Mr. Hardesty, who worked behind the counter at the Murietta General Store.

"You shouldn't swim by yourself. It's dangerous."

"I'm all right."

The man shook his head slowly. His smile taunted her, as though catching her in a lie. "You don't know how to swim."

"I'm learning."

"Those boys left you all alone. That wasn't nice."

He spoke quietly, his voice deep. Her skin crawled at the sound. He had an accent, not like Papa's or the Greeks or Swedes or anyone she knew. He didn't take his eyes from her. The water seemed to grow colder around her. Shivering, she hugged herself and took a step toward the side of the ditch.

"Careful! Snapping turtles can bite off your toes."

"Snapping turtles?" She looked down at the murky water. She couldn't see to the bottom.

"They stay on the bottom and open their mouths wide. They wiggle their tongue to attract fish. One swims close and *snap*! I knew a man who caught one and put it in his boat. It bit off four of his

fingers."

Hildie's heart pounded. Bernie hadn't said anything about snapping turtles or fish. Would he swim in this canal if he knew about them? The bank seemed so far away, closer on the man's side. He hunkered, extending his hand. "Let me help you out." His dark eyes glowed so strangely, Hildemara almost forgot about the turtle hiding in the mud beneath her feet. Her stomach knotted in fear. "I won't hurt you, little girl." His voice turned silky.

Panting now, she felt the fear rising faster. His hand looked so big. He wiggled his fingers like the tongue of the turtle he'd told her about, beckoning her closer. He didn't have calluses like Papa. His hands looked strong and smooth. She leaned away from him. "Careful. You'll go under again." He reminded her of the cat when it watched a gopher hole, waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce. "What's your name?"

Mama said never to be rude to neighbors. This must be Mr. Kimball, the man who bought Abrecan Macy's place. Mama wasn't afraid of neighbors. She talked to everybody. "Hildemara."

"Hill-de-mara." The man dragged out her name as though savoring it. "It's a pretty name for a pretty little girl."

Pretty? No one had ever called her pretty, not even Papa. She felt her face go hot. Mr. Kimball's mouth tipped. Beads of sweat dripped down the sides of his face. His gaze shifted as he looked around furtively.

The silence suddenly bothered Hildie. She didn't even hear any birds. She slid her foot cautiously along the bottom of the ditch, her breath catching every time something brushed against her ankles. When Mr. Kimball got to his feet, something inside her said, *Get away from him!*

Gasping in panic, Hildemara pushed her way through the last few feet of water to her side of the bank. Reaching up, she grasped a hunk of grass and pulled, legs wheeling.

A big splash sounded behind her.

Hildemara had just reached the top of the ditch when she felt a hand grasp her ankle and drag her back. Another hand grasped the back of her shirt. Buttons popped and her shirt came off in his hand as she thrashed. She flipped and flopped like a fish out of water, kicking her free leg and catching him hard on the nose. Uttering a grunt of pain, he let go.

Scrambling to her feet, Hildie ran. She looked back once and

tumbled head over heels, sand flying in all directions. Scrambling up again, she didn't look back this time. Her thin legs pumped up and down, breath coming in frantic sobs, and she raced along the ditch and headed toward the last row of grapes next to the house. The big bay tree loomed ahead.

Mama stood in the backyard, pinning up clothes on the line. Rikka sat on the floor of the washhouse, drawing pictures in the wet sand. Hildemara ran past Mama and up the stairs, yanked the screen door open, and let it slam behind her as she dove into her bedroom. She stepped on the lower bunk and threw herself onto the top one. Her whole body started to shake. Her teeth chattered. Pressing herself into the far corner against the wall, she pulled her legs up against her chest.

## Hoofstuk 22

Die volgende oggend laai Mamma vir Rikki in die kruiwa en loop dorp toe. Fritz Herkner daag nie by die skool op nie. Toe Hildemara die middag by die huis kom, sit Fritz by die kombuistafel met 'n glas melk en 'n bord koekies voor hom. Hy lyk bleek en ellendig. Sy bruin hare is 'n bietjie te lank en daar is dalk 'n bietjie te veel vleis aan sy bene. Hildemara voel jammer vir hom, maar nie jammer genoeg om aan tafel te sit en binne reikafstand van Mamma te wees nie.

"Ek's jammer julle huis het afgebrand, Fritz." Fritz kyk nie op nie. Sy mond bewe en trane loop oor sy wange. Mamma gee sy hand 'n drukkie en wys met haar kop dat Hildemara moet loop. Duidelik om haar te laat verstaan dat sy nie welkom is nie. Sy gaan na haar kamer toe en doen haar huiswerk op die boonste bed.

Mamma roep Bernie binnetoe en sê dat hy die plaas vir Fritz moet gaan wys. "Wys hom die boord en die wingerd. Neem hom na die leivoor toe. Hou jy van hoenders, Fritz? Nie? Wat van hase?" Bernie neem Fritz by die gaasdeur uit en laat dit agter hom toeklap. Clotilde loop agter hulle aan.

Later kan Hildie Mamma in die kombuis met Pappa hoor praat. "Hedda sê hy is baie intelligent."

"Is hy?"

"Ek weet nog nie. Sy sê hy hou van boeke. Ek het 'n paar by die biblioteek gaan kry. Op pad huis toe kon ek hom nie sover kry om oor enigiets te praat nie. Hy het die hele pad gehuil. Hy is erger as Hildemara met haar trane. Hedda was natuurlik nie veel beter nie. Sy het meer as hy gehuil toe ons hulle by die stasie gaan afsien het. Ons moet hierdie seuntjie sterker maak."

"As Hedda so ontsteld was, sal hulle hom waarskynlik oor 'n week kom haal."

Fritz eet die eerste drie dae amper niks nie, al maak Mamma *Hasenpfeffer*, *Sauerbraten* en *Wiener Schnitzel*. Bernie sê Fritz huil hom saans aan die slaap. "As hy nie gou ophou nie, gaan ek hom verwurg!"

Hildemara kom op vir Fritz. "Hoe sou jy voel as ons huis afbrand en Mamma en Pappa jou agterlaat as hulle San Francisco toe gaan?"

"Laat ek dink." Bernie grinnik. "Ek sou nie meer op die plaas moes help nie en sou kon maak wat ek wou!"

"Ek weet hoe dit is om nie vriende te hê nie, Bernie. Dis nog erger as iemand altyd op jou pik. Hy is ons boetie vir die somer. Ons moet gaaf wees met hom."

'n Week na die Herkners se vertrek is daar 'n brief van San Francisco. Fritz huil toe hy dit oopmaak. Hy huil die hele ete deur. Bernie rol sy oë en eet Fritz se aartappelkluitjies.

Toe Hildemara oorleun om Fritz te troos, skud Mamma haar kop en lyk so kwaai dat Hildie hom maar eerder los. Pappa roep almal woonkamer toe en lees Bybel. Fritz sit op die bank en staar deur die venster totdat dit donker word.

Elke paar dae word daar briewe oor en weer gestuur. Ná elke brief is Fritz opnuut gebroke. "Ons moet vir hom werkies gee om sy gedagtes van sy probleme af te kry." Mamma stuur Fritz saam met Hildemara om die hoenders te gaan kos gee. Toe die haan hom agternasit, slaan hy op vlug sonder om die hekkie agter hom toe te maak. Die haan benut sy kans, en hy en drie henne kies koers oor die werf. Dit neem Hildemara 'n uur om hulle te vang, en toe moet sy alleen skool toe loop en vir juffrou Hinkle verduidelik wat gebeur het.

"Hy kan die stal skoonmaak," stel Bernie voor. "Dan sal hy dalk ontslae raak van die babavet wat hy met hom saamdra."

Mamma besluit om Fritz in beheer van die hase te plaas. Fritz hou op huil. Hy wag ook nie meer by die posbus vir sy ma se briewe nie. Hildemara bekommer haar oor wat gaan gebeur as Mamma besluit om weer *Hasenpfeffer* te maak, maar Mamma het reeds daaraan gedink. "Ons het net een reël oor die hase, Fritz. Jy mag nie vir hulle name gee nie."

"Nie eens een nie."

"Nee. Nie eens een nie."

Gelukkig is hulle almal wit. As Frits hulle nie persoonlik ken nie, sal dit nie so erg wees as een dalk wegraak nie.

Mevrou Herkner se briewe arriveer steeds elke paar dae, maar Fritz skryf nie meer as een maal per week nie. Soms wag hy langer en dan kry Mamma 'n brief van Hedda. "Tyd om vir jou ma te skryf, Fritz."

Hildemara beny Fritz sy liefhebbende ma. Sy weet dat Mamma nooit so baie na haar sal verlang nie. Sy bly Hildemara vra wat sy met haar lewe wil doen, asof sy nie kan wag dat Hildie grootword en uit die huis gaan nie.

* * *

Teen die tyd dat die skool sluit, het Fritz behoorlik nesgeskop. Hy begin Bernie aansteek met nuwe idees uit die boeke wat hy lees. “Kan ons ’n boomhuis bou, Pappa? Een soos in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?”

Mamma dink nie veel van die idee nie. “Pappa het genoeg om te doen. As enigiemand enigiets gaan bou, gaan dit julle seuns wees.”

Pappa wil nie vir hulle van sy goeie hout gee nie. “Hulle gaan dit net verniel.” Hy gee die seuns opdrag om die planne op te trek. Hy sal die afmetings doen en op die hout aanbring; hulle kan die saagwerk doen. Teen die einde van die eerste dag se harde werk lyk hulle handpalms soos rou vleis en glimlag hulle breed.

“Ons het ’n valdeur nodig om die vyande uit te hou.” Die *vyande* is natuurlik Hildemara, Clotilde en Rikka. “Ons kan ’n touleer gebruik en dit optrek wanneer ons bo is.”

Pappa geniet die projek uiteindelik só dat hy ’n tweede kleiner, hoër platform as ’n uitkyktoring met ’n leer en valdeur byvoeg. Hy bou ’n bankie rondom die binnemuur van die groot platform drie meter bokant die grond. “Sodat julle ouens nie aan die slaap raak en afval nie. Ons wil nie hê julle moet julle nekke breek nie.”

Tony Reboli, Wallie Engles en Eddie Rinckle kom help. Hildemara sit op die agterste stoeptrappies na hulle en kyk. Hulle lyk soos ’n klomp bobbejaantjies wat in die groot lourierboom rondklouter. Sy wens sy kon ook in die pret deel, maar volgens Bernie is “meisies verbode”. Clotilde gee nie om nie. Sy is te besig om ’n nuwe rok uit te sny en te leer hoe om Mamma se naaimasjien te gebruik. En Rikka hou daarvan om by die kombuistafel te sit en teken. Hildemara wens Elizabeth kon kom speel, maar haar enigste vriendin het Merced toe gegaan vir die somer.

“Abrecan Macy het sy plek verkoop,” sê Pappa die aand aan tafel vir Mamma. “Aan ’n ander alleenloper. Abrecan weet niks van hom nie behalwe dat hy genoeg het om die plek te koop. Hy het nie gesê wat die man van plan is om daarmee te doen nie.”

“Dis tog seker sy eie besigheid.”

“Sy grond grens aan ons s’n. Dit sal goed wees as ons iets van hom weet. Dis nogal vreemd dat iemand al die pad hiernatoe kom om ’n plek te koop en nie weet wat hy daarmee wil doen nie. Sy van is Kimball. Abrecan kon nie sy naam onthou nie.”

Mamma vat vir die nuwe buurman ’n vars kaneel-en-rosyntjiebrood. “Hy’s nie baie vriendelik nie. Hy het die brood gevat en die deur in

my gesig toegemaak."

"Dalk wil hy uitgelos word."

"Ek het nie van sy oë gehou nie."

Dit word so warm in Julie dat die teer smelt. Die seuns daag mekaar uit om in die warm, swart teer te staan om te sien hoe lank hulle voetsole dit hou. Na 'n paar weke se kaalvoet rondhardloop is dit nie meer 'n uitdaging nie en Fritz dink 'n nuwe speletjie uit: elke ou kry 'n kans om op 'n rooimierhoop te staan terwyl iemand met 'n tuinslang gereedstaan. Fritz hou dit skaars tien sekondes en die mierbyte sit tot by sy enkels. Eddie, Tony en Wallie vaar beter, maar niemand doen so goed soos Bernie nie. Dié is vasbeslote om elke speletjie te wen waaraan hy deelneem. Hy byt op sy tande teen die brandende byte en staan totdat die miere sy bobene bereik voordat hy afspring en skree dat Eddie hom moet afspuit. 'n Paar hardnekkige oorlewendes slaag daarin om by sy onderbroek in te kruip. Toe Bernie al skreeuend begin rondspring, kom Mamma by die voordeur uitgehardloop. Uiteindelik gryp Bernie die tuinslang by Eddie en doen wat gedoen moet word terwyl Mamma hande in die sye op die stoep staan en lag. "As 'n mens so dom wil wees, moet jy maar die gevolge dra!"

Hildemara volg die seuns na die leisloot waar hulle gaan swem. Bernie het Fritz leer swem. Sy wil ook leer. "Kom net in!" gil Bernie vir haar. "Beweeg jou arms en skop met jou voete en bly uit ons pad uit. Ons wil nie 'n meisiekind by ons hê nie!" Hildemara klim versigtig in die water. Dis wonderlik koel in die hitte van die dag. Toe haar voete aan die slymerige bodem raak, skrik sy eers vir die glibberige grasse wat soos slange in die stadige stroom om haar enkels krul. Sy loop versigtig teenaan die kant, haar arms in die lug. Iets groots en donkers beweeg agter die bamboesbos aan die ander kant van die sloot en sy skrik. Toe sy 'n gilletjie gee en soontoe wys, gee dit Bernie weer 'n rede om haar te terg.

"Oooee, Hildie sien 'n spook!" Die ander seuns lag. "Kom, julle!" Met sy lang bene klouter Bernie maklik uit die sloot. "Kom ons gaan na die Grand Junction toe. Die water is lekker diep daar. Hierdie sloot is vir kleintjies!" Die Grand Junction is die groot sement leikanaal waaruit die water na die kleineres oorspoel wat tussen die plase deurloop.

"Bernie! Wag!"

"Meisies verbode!" roep Bernie oor sy skouer toe hy langs die sloot afhardloop, die ander op sy hakke.

Hildemara loop versigtig verder en probeer haar selfvertroue opbou.

Dan sien sy ’n beweging agter die bamboese en sy klim vinnig uit die water. Met ’n hart wat vinnig klop, kyk sy oor die leisloot en probeer sien wat daar staan. Daar is geen beweging nie. Die druppels op haar vel is vinnig besig om droog te word. Sy kan Bernie en die seuns verder hoor lag en gil. Hulle stemme raak weg in die verte. Sy is nie gereed om dieper as hierdie sloot te swem nie, en die seuns is in elk geval nie lus vir haar nie.

Sy voel nog steeds ongemaklik, maar gaan sit op die rand van die sloot en laat sak haar voete in die water. Haar vel prikkel asof sy dopgehou word, maar daar is niks wat beweeg nie. Bernie en die ander is teen hierdie tyd al oor die pad. Sy kan die seuns nie meer hoor nie. Dit is doodstil, sy hoor nie eens die voëls nie.

Die son bak op haar skouers en rug en haar klere word vinnig droog. Toe haar bene brand, gly sy versigtig terug in die water. Dis koud na die hitte en sy sak laer totdat net haar kop uitsteek. Sy beweeg haar arms vorentoe en agtertoe net onder die oppervlak. Dan skraap sy haar moed bymekaar, lig haar voete op en sak onmiddellik in die water weg. Sy staan proesend op en vee die water uit haar oë.

“Oppas, jong. Jy kan verdrink.”

Haar hart mis ’n slag toe sy opkyk en ’n man op die oewer sien staan. Hy lyk groter as Pappa, maar hy dra nie ’n oorpak nie. Hy lyk soos meneer Hardesty wat agter die toonbank by die algemene handelaar in Murietta werk.

“Jy behoort nie so alleen te swem nie. Dis gevaarlik.”

“Ek kom reg.”

Die man skud sy kop stadig. Sy glimlag tart haar, asof hy haar betrap dat sy jok. “Jy weet nie hoe om te swem nie.”

“Ek leer.”

“Daardie seuns het jou alleen hier gelos. Dit was nie mooi nie.”

Hy praat sag, sy stem diep. Sy stem laat haar vel kriewel. Hy het ’n aksent, nie soos dié van Pappa of die Grieke of Swede of enigiemand wat sy ken nie. Hy neem sy oë nie van haar af nie. Dis asof die water kouer om haar word. Sy gee ’n tree nader aan die rand van die sloot.

“Versigtig! ’n Snapskilpad kan jou tone afbyt.”

“’n Snapskilpad?” Sy kyk af na die troebel water. Sy kan nie die bodem sien nie.

“Hulle bly op die bodem en maak hulle bekke wyd oop. Hulle wikkel hulle tonge om visse te lok. As een te naby kom, kaplaks! Ek ken ’n man wat een gevang het en hom in sy boot gesit het. Die skilpad het vier van sy vingers afgebyt.”

Hildie se hart klop wild. Bernie het niks van snapskilpaaie of visse gesê nie. Sou hy hier kom swem het as hy van hulle geweet het? Die oewer voel ver; sy is nader aan die man se kant. Hy hurk en steek sy hand uit. "Kom ek help jou uit." Sy donker oë glinster vreemd en Hildemara vergeet amper van die skilpad wat in die modder onder haar voete wegkruip. Haar keel raak stram van vrees. "Ek sal jou nie seermaak nie, my meisie." Sy stem het nou stroperig geword.

Haar asem jaag en sy voel die bangheid al hoe groter word. Sy hand lyk so groot. Hy wikkel sy vingers soos die tong van die skilpad waarvan hy haar vertel het. Hy het nie eelte soos Pappa nie. Sy hande lyk sterk en sy vel glad. Sy staan weg van hom. "Oppas. Jy gaan weer sink." Hy laat haar aan die kat dink wanneer hy 'n muisgat dophou, gereed om op die perfekte oomblik toe te slaan. "Wat's jou naam?"

Mamma sê 'n mens mag nie ongeskik met vreemdelinge wees nie. Dit moet meneer Kimball wees, die man wat Abrecan Macy se plek gekoop het. Mamma is nie bang vir die bure nie. Sy praat met almal. "Hildemara."

"Hill-de-mara." Die man rek haar naam uit asof hy daaraan proe. "Dis 'n mooi naam vir 'n mooi klein dogtertjie."

Mooi? Niemand het al ooit gesê dat sy mooi is nie, selfs nie Pappa nie. Sy voel hoe haar gesig warm word. Meneer Kimball se mondhoeke lig. Die sweet drup langs sy slape af. Sy blik verskuif toe hy stilletjies rondkyk.

Die stilte pla Hildie skielik. Selfs die voëls is stil. Sy voel met haar voet versigtig oor die bodem van die sloot en ys elke keer wanneer iets aan haar enkels raak. Toe meneer Kimball opstaan, weet sy dat sy dadelik van hom af moet wegkom.

Hildemara snak paniekerig na asem toe sy die laaste paar meter deur die water na haar kant van die oewer worstel. Bokant haar kry sy 'n graspol raakgevat en trek haar op.

Agter haar is daar 'n groot plons.

Hildemara het net die bokant van die sloot bereik toe 'n hand om haar enkel sluit en haar terugpluk. Nog 'n hand gryp na die agterkant van haar hemp. Die knope spat en in die worsteling bly haar hemp in sy hand agter. Sy spartel soos 'n vis op droë grond en skop met haar ander been na hom. Toe sy hom hard op die neus krap, skree hy van die pyn en laat haar gaan.

Hildie kom struikelend orent en begin hardloop. Sy kyk een maal om en slaan hard op die sand neer. Toe sy op is, kyk sy nie weer terug nie. Haar maer bene vlieg oor die grond en haar asem kom in

histeriese snikke terwyl sy langs die sloot af na die laaste ry druiwe langs die huis hardloop. Die groot lourierboom doem voor haar op.

Mamma staan in die agterplaas, besig om klere op te hang. Rikka sit op die vloer in die waskamer en teken prentjies in die nat sand. Hildemara hardloop verby Mamma met die trappies op, pluk die gaasdeur oop en laat dit agter haar toeslaan toe sy by haar kamer instorm. Sy trap op die onderste bed en gooi haarself op die boonste een. Haar hele lyf begin bewe. Haar tande klap. Sy kruip tot in die hoek teen die muur en trek haar bene teen haar op.

## Chapter 23

"Hildemara?" Mama stood in the bedroom doorway. "What's wrong with you?" Her eyes flickered. "Where's your shirt?"

The man had her shirt.

"Did you leave it at the ditch?"

Hildemara panted softly, looking past Mama, afraid he might be outside.

Mama glanced out the screen door. "Where are the boys?"

"Grand Junction."

"What happened to your leg? How did you get those scratches?"

Hildemara didn't feel anything, and she didn't want to look. Mama came into the room and stepped up on the bottom bunk. "Come on down from there."

"No."

"Hildemara . . ."

"No!"

"What happened to you?" Mama spoke firmly this time, demanding an answer.

"He . . . he . . . was in the bamboo."

"Who?"

Hildemara started to cry. "Mr. Kimball, I think. I don't know." When Mama reached for her, she screamed. "No! I'm not coming down."

"Hildemara!" Mama held her tight in her arms though she struggled.

Clotilde appeared in the doorway. "What's wrong with Hildie?"

"Go get Rikka. She's in the washhouse."

"But—"

*"Now!"*

Clotilde ran out the screen door. It banged, making Hildemara jerk, then banged twice more, each time more softly. Mama lifted Hildemara down and carried her into the hallway.

"Come on, girls!" Clotilde hurried inside with Rikka. "Inside the house. Go on." She locked the door behind them and told Clotilde and Rikka to play in the living room while she talked with Hildemara in the front bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, Hildemara on her lap. "Now tell me what happened."

Everything poured out of Hildie. She hiccuped sobs and stammered. "Are you mad at me? I don't want to go back for my shirt.

Please, Mama, don't make me."

"I don't care about the shirt. You're going to stay right here inside the house." She sat Hildemara on the bed. She held Hildemara's face firmly and looked into her eyes. "You listen to me now. That man is *never* going to touch you again, Hildemara. He's *never* going to get near you. Not ever again. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Mama." She had never seen such a look in her mother's eyes before. It frightened her all over again.

Mama let go of her and straightened. "Stay in the house." She went out of the bedroom. Hildemara heard a drawer being yanked open. Trembling, she rushed to the doorway and saw Mama standing with a butcher knife in her hand. "You girls stay inside this house."

"Mama!" Hildemara ran out of the bedroom. "Don't go. He's bigger than you."

"He won't be much longer. Lock the door!" The screen door slammed.

What if the man took the knife away and used it on Mama?

"No!" Hildemara yanked the screen door open. "Mama, come back!" Mama was running along the row of grapes. She disappeared around the end. "Papa!" Hildemara shouted. *"Papa!"*

"Ring the bell!" Clotilde stood behind her.

Hildemara grabbed the cord and pulled and pulled and pulled. The bell clanged loudly. Sobbing, Hildemara kept pulling. Cloe held Rikka by the shoulders, both pairs of blue eyes wide.

Papa came running across the yard. "What's wrong?"

Hildemara ran down the steps. "Mama went that way! She has a butcher knife! *She'll get herself killed!*"

Papa didn't wait to ask questions. He ran in the direction Hildemara pointed. "Marta!"

Bernie and Fritz, the others on their heels, came flying around the front of the house. "What's happened?" Bernie panted. "We heard the bell!"

Hildemara sank onto the back steps, covered her head, and sobbed.

"Holy cow!" Tony laughed. "Little Sis is half-naked."

Mortified, Hildemara jumped up and ran inside the house. Gulping sobs, she put her foot on the bottom bunk and dove into the top, pulling a blanket over her.

"Leave her alone!" Cloe shrieked, following after her. She climbed up onto the bunk with Hildie. Rikka climbed up, too. When

Bernie came inside, Cloe yelled, *"No boys allowed!"*

It seemed forever before Hildemara heard Bernie's voice again. "I see Papa. Mama's with him. What in the heck is Papa doing with a butcher knife?"

Hildie let out her breath, but stayed under the blanket. She heard Papa's voice. "Tony, Wallie, Eddie, go on home."

"Did we do something wrong, Mr. Waltert?"

"No, but Bernhard's got work to do. Go on now. Everything is fine." He sounded as though nothing bad had happened. The boys called out their good-byes and left. Papa's voice changed. "Into the house, *Sohn*. Keep the children in the house until I get back."

"Where's he going, Mama?"

"To the sheriff."

* * *

Sheriff Brunner came to the house late in the afternoon. Bernie and Fritz were sent to the tree house, Clotilde and Rikka to the porch bedroom. Hildemara had to sit at the table and tell the sheriff what had happened at the ditch. He looked at the scratches on Hildie's left leg, his face grim.

"I stopped by Kimball's house on the way out here. He wasn't there."

Mama gave a hard laugh. "That doesn't mean he won't come back."

Hildie's heart tripped. Papa sat her on his lap and held her close.

"I'll swear out a warrant for his arrest, but I can't promise anything. He has a car. He's probably miles from here by now."

That night, Hildemara awakened to the smell of smoke. A fire bell clanged in the distance. Mama and Papa stood in the yard, talking in low voices. "Maybe lightning set the place on fire." Mama sounded hopeful.

"There hasn't been any lightning." Papa spoke grimly.

"Let it burn, and him with it." Mama came back inside the house.

The sheriff returned the next morning and spoke to Mama and Papa. "Kimball's house and barn burned down last night." He didn't sound pleased. "You know anything about it?"

Papa answered simply. "No."

Mama spoke her mind as usual. "I went after him with a butcher knife, Sheriff Brunner, with the full intent of killing him. I saw him driving off in his fancy black automobile. I may wish the man dead and in hell, but I wouldn't have any reason to burn down a perfectly

good house or barn. Unless he was in it. Was he?"

"No."

"Now, there's a real pity."

Sheriff Brunner stood silent and then decided, "It must have been Providence."

Bernie and Fritz didn't come down from the tree house until Mama called them in for dinner. "What'd the sheriff want?"

Mama looked between the two of them. "He asked if we knew anything about the fire last night. If he finds the arsonists, he'll arrest them. And before you ask what an arsonist is, Clotilde, it's a person, or persons, who burn down houses and barns."

Bernie and Fritz slunk down in their chairs. Papa stared hard at the two of them. "Whoever started that fire last night had better not brag about it. He'd better not breathe a single word about it, or he—or they—might grow up behind steel bars eating bread and drinking water."

Mama piled potato dumplings on both their plates. "By the way, we're having chocolate cake for dessert tonight."

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*One of our neighbors attempted to ravish Hildemara. If I'd been able to get my hands on him, he would be dead now. Niclas stopped me. We called the sheriff. Of course, by the time he made it out our way, Kimball had fled. If I could have torched his house with him inside, I would have watched him die and been satisfied. Instead he is loose like a mad dog and will harm some other child.*

*Hildemara is a frightened mouse, sitting in the corners of the house. I fight tears every time I look at her, remembering how difficult life was for Elise. Mama coddled her, and my sister became a prisoner of her own fears.*

*I could have taken a switch to Bernhard for leaving her alone at the canal, but what Kimball did is not my son's fault and I will not lay the blame where it does not belong.*

*But what do I do now? What happened has happened and there is no undoing it. Life goes on. Somehow, I have to find a way to make Hildemara step out into the sunshine again and not fear every shadow.*

* * *

Hildemara didn't want to leave her room, let alone the house, but Mama insisted she do her usual chores. "You are not going to let that

man turn you into a prisoner to your fears."

When Hildie went outside, she felt light-headed and sick to her stomach. She kept looking around as she fed the chickens. She felt a little better weeding. The vegetable garden was closer to the house. Bernie came over and hunkered down next to her. "You want to go swimming again? I won't leave you alone. I swear on a stack of Bibles." She shook her head.

"We're going to a movie tomorrow," Mama announced at dinner that night. Everyone but Hildemara whooped with excitement. She didn't want to walk by Kimball's property.

"Maybe we'll even have ice cream after, if you all behave."

Hildemara walked beside Mama while the others ran ahead and then back. She came around to the other side of Mama when they crossed the irrigation ditch with the bamboo growing on the south side.

"No, you don't." Mama made her walk on that side of the road. "Take a good long look when we pass his place, Hildemara." Two blackened piles of rubble sat where the house and barn used to be. "Abrecan Macy was a nice man. Remember the sheep? You loved the lambs, didn't you? Abrecan Macy was our friend. Abrecan Macy was a gentleman." Mama took her hand and squeezed it tight. "You let your mind dwell on the things that are right and true and lovely." She squeezed again and let go. "You think about Abrecan Macy the next time you pass this property."

* * *

Every week after that, Mama took the gang of kids to town for a matinee. The boys always raced down the aisle to grab front-row seats. Hildemara and Cloe sat a few rows behind them. Mama sat in back with Rikka on her lap, whispering to other mothers who kept watch over their children.

The boys talked through the short newsreels, laughed raucously through the slapstick comedy with pie-throwing antics or *Our Gang* mischief with Buster Brown. When the main feature came on, they howled and whooped, spending the next hour booing and hissing bad guys and cheering on the hero. They stamped their feet through chases and shouted, "Get 'em, get 'em, get 'em!" as the horse galloped across the scene. Hildemara developed her first crush, on Hollywood cowboy Tom Mix.

Papa decided they needed a dog on the farm. Everyone but Mama thought that was a good idea. "I'd rather have a gun." Mama sniffed.

Papa chuckled. “A big, mean dog is safer than Mama with a gun!”

Everyone laughed.

Bernie and Fritz walked down to the Portola Dairy the next morning. Bernie came back carrying the covered tin of milk, a stray dog on his heels. Mama stood on the porch. “Where did you find that scrawny excuse for an animal?”

Fritz grinned, patting the black dog on the head. “He found us. We heard what Mr. Waltert said last night. God must have heard him, too.”

“God, my foot!” She came down the steps. “Just like that, you have a big dog follow you home from the dairy. More like you petted him. Did you let him stick his nose in our milk, too?”

“He’ll bark if anyone comes on the place, Mama.”

Mama stood on the lawn. “He’s no watchdog. Look at him, stirring up a cloud of dust with his tail.”

“He’s just a pup right now. He’ll get bigger.”

“Who told you that? Aldo Portola?”

“He’s smart. We can train him. He was real hungry.”

*“Was?”* She took the milk tin from Bernie. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!”

Hildemara sat on the porch, giggling. The dog trotted over and sat in front of Mama. He stared up at her with big, limpid brown eyes, his pink tongue lolling out the side of his wide canine grin. He edged closer, stretching out his neck, tail waving faster.

“Look, Mama!” Hildemara came down the steps. “He’s trying to lick your hand.”

“Balderdash!” Mama’s face softened. “He’s trying to get more milk.”

“Balderdash!” both boys shouted. “That’s his name!”

Mama shook her head, mouth twitching. “I doubt we can get rid of him now that you’ve given him food.” She headed for the steps. The dog followed on her heels. She stopped and pointed down at him. “Don’t get any ideas.”

Hildemara petted him. “Can he sleep in the house, Mama?”

“He can sleep in the tree with the boys, if they can get him up the ladder.”

The dog didn’t cooperate.

* * *

All through the rest of that summer, the family accumulated animals. Papa bought a second horse. Mama bought another rooster to

“improve the flock.” Fritz caught a horned lizard and kept it in a box in the tree house. A tabby cat showed up and had kittens in the barn.

Papa wanted to get rid of them. “I don’t want my barn turning into a cathouse.”

Mama laughed so hard, tears ran down her cheeks. “You need to work more on your English, Niclas.” He asked what he had said. When she explained, his face turned bright red.

Last, Mama brought home a cow. “The children are growing so fast, we might as well have milk at hand, rather than have to walk a mile to get it.” Dash stood by the cow, panting and smiling. “Don’t worry. You’ll get your share.” Mama put a big bell around the cow’s neck. “Reminds me of Switzerland, where all the cows wore bells.”

Summer blazed by in a haze of heat. In late August, the almond harvest began. Papa and the boys stretched out canvas under the trees, using bamboo poles to knock the stubborn almonds that wouldn’t fall after shaking the branches.

Mama received a letter from the Herkners. “They’re coming on Friday.”

They arrived in a new black Ford Model A with sideboards. Hedda jumped out and ran straight to Fritz, hugging and kissing him until he protested.

Bernie stared at the car. “Holy cow! Will you look at this thing?” He walked around the Model A. “Can I sit in it, Mr. Herkner?”

Wilhelm laughed. “Go ahead.” He pried Hedda off their son and held him at arm’s length. “Look how tan and fit he looks!” Hedda grabbed and hugged him again, tears running down her cheeks.

Fritz turned beet red. “Ah, Mama. Don’t call me Fritzie.”

Bernie laughed. “Fritzie! Hey, Fritzie!”

Mama took the Herkners inside for coffee and angel food cake. It had taken twelve egg whites to make it. Papa had wanted a slice, but Mama said he would have to wait. “It’s not polite to serve leftovers to guests.” She had made Papa custard with the yolks.

The Herkners didn’t stay long. Fritz looked as miserable as the first day he arrived, but at least he didn’t shed a tear. Bernie needled him mercilessly. “Fritzie. Oh, Fritzie.”

“See if I come back.”

“Who invited you in the first place?”

“Your mother.”

Cloe joined in the heckling. “Poor Mama didn’t know what she was getting.”

Hildemara laughed. “You’ve been nothing but a big pain in the neck.”

“And you’re nothing but a *girl*.”

Mr. Herkner put the car in gear. “We’d better get out of here!”

“Whiner!” Bernie called out, running alongside the car.

“Toad-faced pollywog!” Fritz yelled back.

The black car paused briefly at the end of the driveway and then pulled out onto the road. The car picked up speed. Fritz leaned out the window and waved.

Bernie scuffed his bare toes through the dust. “Summer’s over.” Shoulders hunched, he headed off to do his chores.

## Hoofstuk 23

"Hildemara?" Mamma staan in die deur. "Wat gaan aan?" Haar oë flikker. "Waar's jou hemp?"

Die man het haar hemp.

"Het jy dit by die sloot gelos?"

Hildemara se asem jaag terwyl sy verby Mamma kyk, bang dat hy buite is.

Mamma kyk oor haar skouer. "Waar is die seuns?"

"Die Grand Junction."

"Wat het met jou been gebeur? Hoe het jy hierdie skrape gekry?"

Hildemara voel niks nie en sy wil nie kyk nie. Mamma kom die kamer binne en trap op die onderste bed. "Kom, klim nou af."

"Nee."

"Hildemara ... "

"Nee!"

"Wat het met jou gebeur?" Mamma se stem is ferm. Sy verwag 'n antwoord.

"Hy ... hy ... was in die bamboese."

"Wie?"

Hildemara begin huil. "Meneer Kimball, dink ek. Ek weet nie." Toe Mamma aan haar wil raak, skree sy. "Nee! Ek kom nie af nie."

"Hildemara!" Mamma hou haar styf vas, al spartel sy.

Clotilde verskyn in die deur. "Wat's fout met Hildie?"

"Gaan haal vir Rikka. Sy's in die waskamer."

"Maar – "

"*Nou!*"

Clotilde hardloop buitentoe. Die gaasdeur klap en Hildemara ruk. Sy sit versteend terwyl die deur nog twee maal klap, elke keer sagter. Mamma tel Hildemara af en dra haar kombuis toe.

"Kom, julle!" Clotilde kom met Rikka ingehardloop. "In die huis in. Gou." Sy sluit die deur agter hulle en beveel Clotilde en Rikka om in die woonkamer te gaan speel terwyl sy met Hildemara in die voorste slaapkamer praat. Sy gaan sit op die kant van die bed, Hildemara op

haar skoot. “Vertel my nou wat gebeur het.”

Alles borrel uit terwyl sy snik en stamel. “Is Mamma kwaad vir my? Ek wil nie teruggaan en my hemp gaan haal nie. Asseblief, Mamma, moenie sê ek moet nie.”

“Ek gee nie om oor jou hemp nie. Jy gaan net hier in die huis bly.” Sy sit Hildemara op die bed neer. Sy hou Hildemara se gesig stewig vas en kyk in haar oë. “Luister nou na my. Daardie man sal nóóit weer aan jou raak nie, Hildemara. Hy gaan nóóit weer naby jou kom nie. Nooit ooit weer nie. Verstaan jy my?”

“Ja, Mamma.” Sy het nog nooit so ’n kyk in haar ma se oë gesien nie. Dit maak haar van voor af bang.

Mamma los haar hand en staan op. “Bly in die huis.” Sy loop by die kamer uit. Hildemara hoor hoe ’n laai oopgeruk word. Sy haas haar na die deur en sien Mamma met die vleismes in haar hand. “Julle kinders bly in die huis.”

“Mamma!” Hildemara storm uit die kamer uit. “Moenie gaan nie. Hy is groter as Mamma.”

“Nie vir veel langer nie. Sluit die deur!” Die gaasdeur klap.

Wat as die man die mes by Mamma afneem en haar aanval?

“Nee!” Hildemara pluk die gaasdeur oop. “Mamma, kom terug!” Mamma hardloop langs die ry druiwe af. Sy verdwyn om die hoek. “Pappa!” gil Hildemara. “*Pappa!*”

“Lui die klok!” Clotilde staan agter haar.

Hildemara gryp die koord en trek en trek en trek. Die gelui weergalm oor die werf. Deur haar snikke hou Hildemara aan met trek. Cloe hou Rikka aan die skouers vas, albei pare blou oë wyd gerek.

Pappa kom oor die werf aangehardloop. “Wat’s verkeerd?”

Hildemara hardloop die trappies af. “Mamma het soontoe gehardloop! Sy het die vleismes! *Sy gaan seerkry!*”

Pappa wag nie om vrae te vra nie. Hy hardloop in die rigting waarin Hildemara gewys het. “Marta!”

Bernie en Fritz met die ander op hulle hakke kom voor om die huis gevlieg. “Wat het gebeur?” Bernie se asem jaag. “Ons het die klok gehoor!”

Hildemara sak op die stoeptrappies neer, druk haar gesig in haar hande en snik.

“Kyk, ouens!” Tony lag. “Kleinsus is halfkaal.”

Hildemara spring met vlammende wange op en storm die huis in. Sy snik rukkerig, trap op die onderste bed en duik bo-op die boonste waar sy ’n kombers oor haar trek.

"Los haar uit!" skree Cloe en hardloop agter haar aan. Sy klim saam met Hildie op die bed. Rikka klim ook op. Toe Bernie inkom, gil Cloe. "Seuns verbode!"

Dit voel soos 'n ewigheid voordat Hildemara weer Bernie se stem hoor. "Ek sien vir Pappa. Mamma is by hom. Wat maak Pappa met die vleismes?"

Hildie laat haar asem uit, maar bly onder die kombers. Sy hoor Pappa se stem: "Tony, Wallie, Eddie, gaan huis toe."

"Het ons iets verkeerds gedoen, meneer Waltert?"

"Nee, maar Bernhard het werk om te doen. Loop julle nou. Daar's nie fout nie." Hy klink asof niks slegs gebeur het nie. Die seuns roep totsiens en loop. Pappa se stem verander. "In die huis, *Sohn*. Hou die kinders in die huis totdat ek terugkom."

"Waarnatoe gaan hy, Mamma?"

"Polisie toe."

***

Sheriff Brunner kom laat die middag by hulle huis aan. Bernie en Fritz word boomhuis toe gestuur, Clotilde en Rikka na die agterstoep. Hildemara moet by die tafel sit en vir die sheriff vertel wat by die leisloot gebeur het. Hy kyk na die skrape op Hildie se linkerbeen, sy gesig stroef.

"Op pad na julle toe was ek by Kimball se huis. Hy was nie daar nie."

Mamma gee 'n harde lag. "Dit beteken nie dat hy nie gaan terugkom nie."

Hildie se hart mis 'n slag. Pappa tel haar op sy skoot en hou haar teen hom vas.

"Ek sal 'n lasbrief uitstuur vir sy arres, maar ek kan niks belowe nie. Hy het 'n motor. Teen hierdie tyd is hy seker al kilometers van hier af."

Daardie nag word Hildemara wakker van die reuk van rook. 'n Brandklok lui in die verte. Mamma en Pappa staan buitekant en praat sag met mekaar. "Dalk is die plek deur 'n weerligstraal getref." Mamma klink hoopvol.

"Daar was nie enige weerlig nie," kom dit stroef van Pappa.

"Nou ja, laat dit brand, en hom daarmee saam." Mamma kom terug huis toe.

Die sheriff kom die volgende oggend terug en praat met Mamma en Pappa. “Kimball se huis en skuur het verlede nag afgebrand.” Hy klink nie gelukkig nie. “Weet julle enigiets daarvan?”

Pappa antwoord sonder omhaal. “Nee.”

Mamma sê ook wat in haar gedagtes is. “Ek het hom met ’n vleismes agternagesit, sheriff Brunner, en ek was van plan om hom te vermoor. Ek het hom in sy deftige swart motor sien wegry. Ek wens dalk dat die man dood is en in die hel brand, maar ek het nie enige rede om ’n doodgoeie huis of skuur af te brand nie. Tensy hy daarin was. Was hy?”

“Nee.”

“Dis nou jammer.”

Sheriff Brunner bly ’n paar oomblikke stil en dan besluit hy: “Dit moes die Voorsienigheid gewees het.”

Bernie en Fritz bly in die boomhuis totdat Mamma hulle roep om te kom eet. “Wat wou die sheriff hê?”

Mamma kyk na hulle. “Hy wou weet of ons enigiets van gisteraand se brand weet. As hy die brandstigters kry, gaan hy hulle arresteer. En voordat jy vra wat ’n brandstigter is, Clotilde, dis ’n persoon of persone wat huise en skure afbrand.”

Bernie en Fritz skuif laer af op hulle stoele. Pappa kyk stip na hulle. “Wie daardie brand ook al gestig het, beter nie daarmee loop en spog nie. Hy beter nie ’n enkele woord daaroor rep nie, anders gaan hy – of hulle – agter tralies grootword waar ’n mens net brood en water kry om te eet.”

Mamma skep vir elkeen ’n hoop aartappelkluitjies in. “Terloops, daar is sjokoladekoek vir nagereg.”

***

*Liewe Rosie*

*Een van ons bure het probeer om Hildemara te verkrag. As ek my hande op hom kon lê, sou hy nou dood gewees het. Niclas het my gekeer en ons het die sheriff laat kom. Teen die tyd dat hy daar opgedaag het, het Kimball natuurlik gevlug. As ek sy huis met hom binne kon afbrand en kyk hoe hy brand, sou ek vrede gehad het. Nou loop hy los en kan hy ’n ander kind seermaak.*

*Hildemara is soos ’n verskrikte muis wat in die hoeke van die huis wegkruip. Ek wil elke keer huil as ek na haar kyk. Ek onthou van voor af hoe moeilik die lewe vir Elise was. Mamma het haar opgepiep en my suster het ’n gevangene van haar eie vrese geword.*

*Ek kon Bernhard aan die brand slaan omdat hy haar alleen by die kanaal gelos het, maar wat Kimball gedoen het, is nie my seun se skuld nie en ek sal die blaam nie lê waar dit nie hoort nie.*

*Maar wat moet ek nou doen? Wat gebeur het, het gebeur en dit kan nie ongedaan gemaak word nie. Die lewe gaan aan. Op een of ander manier moet ek 'n manier kry om Hildemara weer in die son te kry en nie vir elke skaduwee te laat skrik nie.*

***

Hildemara wil nie uit haar kamer kom nie, laat staan nog die huis, maar Mamma dring aan dat sy haar gewone werkies doen. "Jy gaan nie toelaat dat daardie man jou in 'n gevangene van jou vrese verander nie."

Toe Hildie buitentoe gaan, voel sy lighoofdig en effens naar. Sy bly omkyk na die huis terwyl sy die hoenders voer. Sy voel 'n bietjie beter toe sy onkruid uittrek. Die groentetuin is nader aan die huis. Bernie kom kniel langs haar. "Wil jy weer gaan swem? Ek sal jou nie alleen los nie. Ek sweer op 'n hele hoop Bybels." Sy skud haar kop.

"Ons gaan môre in dorp toe. Daar wys 'n mooi rolprent," sê Mamma daardie aand aan tafel. Almal behalwe Hildemara is opgewonde. Sy wil nie verby Kimball se eiendom loop nie.

"Dalk gaan ons ná die tyd selfs roomys eet, as almal hulle gedra."

Hildemara loop langs Mamma terwyl die ander vooruit hardloop en terugkom. Sy loop aan Mamma se ander kant toe hulle die leivoor met die bamboesbos oorsteek.

"Nee." Mamma dwing haar om aan daardie kant van die pad te loop. "Kyk lank en mooi as ons hier verbyloop, Hildemara." Daar is twee swart puinhope waar die huis en skuur eens gestaan het. "Abrecan Macy was 'n goeie man. Onthou jy die skape? Jy was mal oor die lammetjies. Abrecan Macy was ons vriend. Abrecan Macy was 'n gentleman." Mamma neem haar hand en gee dit 'n stywe drukkie. "Dink aan alles wat reg en waar en mooi is." Nadat sy haar hand nog 'n drukkie gegee het, laat sy dit gaan. "Dink aan Abrecan Macy wanneer jy volgende keer weer hier verbyloop."

***

Daarna neem Mamma die kinders elke week dorp toe vir ’n middagvertoning. Die seuns hardloop altyd in die paadjie af om in die voorste ry te gaan sit. Hildemara en Cloe sit ’n paar rye agter hulle. Mamma sit agter met Rikka op haar skoot waar sy en die ander ma’s met klein kinders onderling fluister.

Die seuns praat deur die kort nuusfilms en lag hulle hees vir die tertgooiery in die lawwe voorprente. Die hoofvertoning word met ’n gegil en gefluit begroet, en vir die volgende uur word die slegte ouens uitgejou en die held toegejuig. Wanneer daar ’n jaagtog is en die perde oor die skerm hardloop, stamp die kinders met hulle voete op die vloer en gil: “Vang hulle, vang hulle, vang hulle!” Hildemara raak vir die eerste keer verlief, op die Hollywood-cowboy Tom Mix.

Pappa besluit dat hulle ’n hond op die plaas nodig het. Almal behalwe Mamma dink dis ’n goeie plan. “Ek sou dink ’n geweer is ’n beter idee.” Mamma snuif.

Pappa lag. “’n Groot, kwaai hond is veiliger as Mamma met ’n geweer!”

Almal lag.

Bernie en Fritz loop die volgende oggend na die Portolas se melkery toe. Bernie kom terug met hulle melk en ’n wegloopbrak op sy hakke. Mamma staan op die stoep. “Waar het julle hierdie maer verskoning vir ’n dier opgetel?”

Fritz grinnik en vryf oor die swart hond se kop. “Hy het óns opgetel. Ons het gehoor wat meneer Waltert gisteraand gesê het. Die Here het hom seker ook gehoor.”

“Die Here, my voet!” Sy kom by die trappies af. “Heeltemal uit die bloute is daar ’n groot hond wat van die melkery af agter julle aanloop. Julle het tien teen een met hom gespeel. Het julle hom nie sommer ook van ons melk gegee nie?”

“Hy sal blaf as enigiemand naby die huis kom, Mamma.”

Mamma gaan staan op die grasperk. “Hy is nie ’n waghond nie. Kyk net hoe maak hy stof met daardie stert van hom.”

“Hy’s op die oomblik nog net ’n klein hondjie. Hy sal groter word.”

“Wie het dit vir jou gesê? Aldo Portola?”

“Hy’s slim. Ons kan hom leer. Hy was baie honger.”

“*Was?*” Sy vat die melk by Bernie. “Ag, om hemelsnaam!”

Hildemara sit en giggel op die stoep. Die hond draf nader en gaan sit voor Mamma. Hy kyk met groot, opregte bruin oë en ’n breë hondeglimlag na haar. Hy kom bietjies-bietjies nader en steek sy kop na haar toe uit terwyl sy stert al vinniger swaai.

“Kyk, Mamma!” Hildemara kom by die trappies af. “Hy probeer Mamma se hand lek.”

“*Balderdash*, dis sommer nonsies!” Mamma se gesig versag. “Hy wil nog melk hê.”

“Balderdash!” gil albei seuns. “Dis sy naam!”

Mamma skud haar kop, en dit lyk of sy wil glimlag. “Noudat julle hom kos gegee het, gaan ons nie sommer van hom ontslae raak nie.” Toe sy omdraai en huis toe loop, is die hond op haar hakke. Sy gaan staan en wys af na hom. “Moenie idees kry nie.”

Hildemara vryf hom. “Kan hy in die huis slaap, Mamma?”

“Hy kan saam met die seuns in die boom slaap, as hulle hom by die leer kan opkry.”

Die hond blyk nie daarvoor te vinde te wees nie.

***

Deur die loop van die somer word daar diere aangeskaf. Pappa koop ’n tweede perd. Mamma koop nog ’n haan om die “bloedlyn te verbeter”. Fritz vang ’n salmander wat hy in ’n boks in die boomhuis aanhou. ’n Grys strepieskat maak haar opwagting en kry haar kleintjies in die skuur.

Laastens bring Mamma ’n koei huis toe. “Die kinders groei so vinnig, ons kan net sowel ons eie koei hê pleks daarvan om ’n kilometer-en-’n-half ver te loop om melk te gaan haal.” Dash staan uitasem en met ’n breëbekglimlag langs die koei. “Moenie bang wees nie. Jy sal jou deel kry.” Mamma hang ’n groot klok aan die koei se nek. “Dit herinner my aan Switserland waar al die koeie klokke dra.”

Die somer bak in ’n hittewaas verby. In Augustus is dit tyd vir die amandeloes. Pappa en die seuns sprei ’n seil onder die bome en gebruik bamboestokke om aan die hardkoppige amandels te stamp wat nie wou val nadat die takke geskud is nie.

Mamma kry ’n brief van die Herkners. “Hulle kom Vrydag.”

Hulle arriveer in ’n nuwe swart Ford Model A met sypanele. Hedda spring uit en hardloop reguit na Fritz toe. Sy druk en soen hom totdat hy protesteer.

Nadat Bernie oopmond na die motor gestaar het, fluit hy en loop rondom die Model A. “Kan ek inklim, meneer Herkner?”

Wilhelm lag. “Gerus, ou seun.” Hy bevry sy seun uit Hedda se omhelsing en hou hom ’n armlengte weg. “Kyk hoe bruin en fiks lyk

jy!" Hedda gryp en omhels hom weer terwyl trane oor haar wange loop.

Fritz bloos bloedrooi. "Mamma, nee. Moenie vir my Fritzie sê nie."

Bernie lag. "Fritzie! Haai, Fritzie!"

Mamma nooi die Herkners binnetoe vir koffie en silwersuikerkoek. Mamma het twaalf eierwitte daarvoor gebruik. Pappa het 'n stukkie gebedel, maar Mamma het gesê hy moet wag. "Dis nie goeie maniere om oorskiet voor te sit nie." Met die eiergele het sy vir Pappa vla gemaak.

Die Herkners bly nie lank nie. Fritz lyk net so miserabel soos met sy aankoms, maar ten minste huil hy nie weer nie. Bernie terg hom genadeloos. "Fritzie. O, Fritzie."

"As jy so aanhou, kom ek nie weer terug nie."

"Wie het jou in die eerste plek genooi?"

"Jou ma."

Cloe moet ook 'n stuiwer ingooi. "Arme Mamma het nie geweet waarvoor sy haar inlaat nie."

Hildemara lag. "Jy was niks anders as 'n pyn in die nek nie."

"En jy is niks anders as 'n *meisie* nie."

Meneer Herkner skakel die motor aan. "Ons moet liewer hier wegkom!"

"Tjankbalie!" roep Bernie waar hy langs die motor hardloop.

"Paddagesig!" skree Fritz terug.

Aan die einde van die oprit wag die swart motor 'n oomblik voordat meneer Herkner by die grootpad indraai. Die motor vermeerder spoed. Fritz leun deur die venster en waai.

Bernie skop met sy kaal tone na die sand. "Die somer is verby." Dan loop hy met hangskouers om sy plaaswerk te gaan doen.

## Chapter 24

Sometimes Mama would invite a dusty, tired-looking salesman into the house. She'd make a sandwich, brew some coffee, and sit awhile listening to his sad story. Hildemara listened while studying the American history books Mama brought from the library. She and Papa had to pass a citizenship test, and Mama decided the children should learn everything too.

Mama made everyone but Rikka memorize the Bill of Rights and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. She drilled them on the Constitution and the amendments. "Rikka doesn't have to be naturalized. She's a citizen by birth." She poked Rikka's nose. "But don't think that gets you off the hook. You're going to learn all this so when you're older, you won't be like most natural-born Americans taking their freedom for granted, not even bothering to vote and then complaining about everything."

Sometimes, just to get away from Mama's demands, Hildemara climbed the chinaberry tree in the front yard and hid among the leafy branches. Almost twelve years old, she liked to be high up where she could see her world.

Mama opened a window and Hildemara heard the rapid clicking as Cloe pumped the sewing machine. She had started another sewing project, a dress for Rikki this time. Rikki sat on the front steps, holding a jar with a captured butterfly inside. She studied it intently, a drawing pad and pencil beside her. Hildemara knew her sister would open the jar when she finished her drawing and release the butterfly. She hadn't kept one more than a few hours after Papa told her some only lived a few days. Papa led the horses into the barn. Bernie went into the shower house. Across the street, the Musashi girls weeded among rows of strawberries.

Leaning back against the trunk, she listened to the hum of insects, rustling of leaves, and birdsong. Everyone seemed to have his place in life. Papa loved farming. Mama managed the house, bills, and kids. Bernie dreamed of grafting trees and improving plant production like Luther Burbank. Mama said Clotilde had the talent to be a better seamstress than her own mother. Rikki would be an artist.

Hildie felt content sitting in the tree, staying at home on the farm, being near Mama and Papa, even when Mama became annoyed that she didn't "find something to do!"

Mama opened the front door. "Come on down from there,

Hildemara. Time to stop daydreaming. There's work to be done."

Lucas Kutchner, another German immigrant, came to dinner again that evening. Papa had met him in town, where he made his living as a mechanic. He worked on bicycles and cars and anything else that broke down, including pumps and clocks. "He can fix anything," Papa told Mama when introducing them for the first time. Mr. Kutchner didn't have a wife and didn't know many people in town.

Papa and he sat at the kitchen table and talked about politics and religion, railroads and cars replacing wagons, while Mama cooked dinner. Sometimes Mr. Kutchner would bring clothing that needed mending and let Clotilde sew on a button or stitch a seam back together.

Mr. Kutchner believed in the same rules Mama did and never came empty-handed. He brought a box of chocolates the first time, which endeared him to Mama. He brought a bag of licorice on the next visit. He had an automobile like the Herkners, and he let Bernie sit behind the steering wheel and pretend to drive. Mr. Kutchner took Papa out for a ride once. Papa wiped sweat and dust off his face when he got out. Mr. Kutchner slapped the hood. "So what do you think, Niclas? Are you ready to buy one? I could get you a good deal."

"I have two good horses and two good feet. I don't need a car." Papa said it with such conviction, Mr. Kutchner didn't bring up the subject again.

Mama went to town one day and came back in the front seat of Lucas Kutchner's car, Rikka sitting on her lap. She pushed the door open and got out, setting Rikka on the ground. Hildemara stood from where she had been working in the garden. Mama looked flushed, her eyes bright. "Hildemara! Come look after your sister." Bernie stopped digging the big hole for the water reserve near the garden. He jammed the shovel in the ground and came out to take a look.

The car chugged several times, coughed once, and died.

Mr. Kutchner got out, a big grin on his face. "So what do you think of her, Marta?"

Mama's expression changed. She shrugged as she faced him. "Not much. That thing wheezes and grunts more than any sick animal I've ever tended."

Mr. Kutchner looked surprised. "She needs a little work, but I can fix her up. I'll give you a good price."

Hildie told Rikka to go in the house and get her sketchbook, then

followed Bernie into the yard. “Are you buying that car, Mama?”

“A horse runs better!”

“A car runs faster and goes longer!”

Mama gave Bernie a quelling glance, but his eyes were fixed on the shiny black Tin Lizzie. “Did I ask for your opinion, Bernhard Waltert?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Go on back to your digging.”

Bernie let out a deep sigh of suffering and headed back. Rikka and Cloe came out the back door and sat on the step.

Mama put her hands on her hips. “I don’t like the look of those tires either.”

“They just need more air.”

“I wouldn’t buy a car without new tires.”

“Tires cost money.”

“So does tailoring and mending. So do roast beef dinners. Not that you’re not always welcome, of course.”

Mr. Kutchner scratched his head and looked befuddled. Mama smirked, but quickly covered it. She walked over to the car and ran her hand over the hood the same way she ran her hand over a sick cow. Hildie knew Mama had already made up her mind. She just had more whittling to do on the price. Mr. Kutchner saw the way she stroked the car and knew he had a buyer. “I’ll have her purring like a kitten.”

Mama took her hand away and looked him straight in the eye. “Get her to work like a Swiss watch and we’ll talk about it. And another thing, Lucas. You and I both know that car isn’t worth what you’re asking for it. Maybe you should try selling this car to Niclas again. See what he says about your offer.” She headed for the house. “Thank you for the ride, Lucas. Nice you just happened to see me walking home. Providential, wasn’t it?”

“All right!” Mr. Kutchner called out. “Wait a minute!” He started after her. “Let’s talk about it now.”

Mama stopped and turned slowly, cocking her head. “Go get potatoes and carrots for dinner, Hildemara.”

Hildemara took her time pulling up potatoes and carrots while keeping an eye on Mama, wondering what Papa would have to say about her conversation with Lucas Kutchner. When they shook hands, Hildemara knew what that meant. Mr. Kutchner headed back for the car, kicking the dust before he got in and started the engine. Mama

waved. When he pulled out onto the road, she danced a little jig and laughed.

Lifting the basket of dirty potatoes and carrots, Hildemara met her at the back door. Cloe stood up from the step where she'd been sitting. "Papa's going to kill you."

"Not if I kill myself first."

"Did you do it?" Bernie yelled.

Bernie just couldn't keep his mouth shut. As soon as Papa took his seat, Bernie grinned. "Have you told him about the car yet?"

Papa's head came up. "What car?"

"Lucas Kutchner gave Mama a ride home in his car today. He was trying to sell it to her." He took a helping of potatoes *au gratin*. "It can go up to twenty-five miles an hour!"

"I don't think Lucas was driving anywhere near that fast when he brought me and Rikka home."

Red climbed up Papa's neck into his face. He put his knife and fork down and stared at Mama while she cut meat off her chicken thigh. Hildemara bit her lip and looked between them.

"We don't need a car, Marta. We don't have the money for one."

"You said we didn't need a washing machine. I'd still be using that bucket if I hadn't saved the two dollars myself."

"A washing machine doesn't need gas and tires!"

"Just elbow grease."

"A washing machine doesn't need a mechanic to keep it working."

"You know how to repair locomotives."

Papa's voice kept rising. "A washing machine won't run you into a tree or a ditch or turn over and crush you to death in a pile of twisted metal!"

Rikka started to cry. "Mama, don't buy that car."

Mama told Bernie to pass the carrots. "Not one dollar has passed from my hand into Lucas's."

"I'm glad to hear that." Papa sounded relieved, but not fully convinced. He kept a cautious eye on her as he ate.

Mama tucked a forkful of potatoes *au gratin* into her mouth and chewed, looking at the ceiling. Papa frowned. "I had one ride in that contraption of his and saw my life passing before my eyes."

Mama sniffed. "I grant you, Lucas isn't much of a driver. Maybe if he watched the road more and talked less . . ."

Papa froze. "What do you know about driving?"

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.” She picked up a roll and began buttering it. “Yet.” She lifted the roll toward her mouth. “It doesn’t look all that difficult.”

“I hear it feels like you’re riding the wind!” Bernie couldn’t help himself.

Papa snorted. “It’s more like death breathing in your face.”

Mama laughed.

“What did Mr. Kutchner want for the car, Mama?”

Papa glared at Bernie. “Eat your supper! It doesn’t matter what Lucas wants. We’re not buying! We have two good horses and a wagon! That’s all we need.” Papa looked angry.

Mama lifted her hands in a light gesture. “Why don’t we take a vote?”

“Aye!” Bernie called out. Cloe and Rikka raised their hands, not looking at Papa’s face.

“What about you, Hildemara?”

She looked at her father. “I’ll abstain.”

“You would.” Mama glowered at her. Sawing off another piece of meat from the chicken thigh, she lifted it toward her mouth. “Doesn’t matter. Ayes win without you.”

“It’s only a democracy around here when you know which way the vote will go,” Papa grumbled. “I hope you don’t kill yourself or any of our children driving that thing.”

* * *

Lucas Kutchner came out to the farm after school on Friday, Mama in the passenger seat. Rikka climbed down from the front seat. Bernie and Hildemara ran into the yard to hear what Mama might say. Papa came out of the barn and stood watching, arms akimbo. Mr. Kutchner called out a hello, but Papa turned and went back into the barn. Wincing, Mr. Kutchner turned back to Mama as she walked around the car. “Well? What do you think?”

“Niclas said you were a good mechanic.”

“New tires, too.” He kicked one.

“So I see.”

“The price is good.”

“The price is fair.”

“It’s better than fair. This is the best deal you’ll ever make in your whole life.”

“I doubt that. Just one last thing, Lucas.”

Mr. Kutchner looked dubious and put-upon. “What now?”

"You have to teach me to drive."

"Oh!" Mr. Kutchner laughed loudly. "Well, get behind the wheel! There's nothing to it."

Papa came back out. "Marta!" he called in sharp warning.

She slid into the driver's seat and put her hands on the wheel. "Watch out for your sister, Hildemara, and stay back. I don't want to drive over anyone."

"Marta!"

"Go curry your horses!" Mama started the car.

Cloe charged out the back door. "Is she going to do it? Is she?"

"Stay back!" Papa shouted.

The Tin Lizzie screeched in protest. Startled, Rikka covered her ears and screamed. Mr. Kutchner yelled something. The car jerked forward a couple of times and died. Papa laughed. "I hope you didn't buy it!"

Mama's face reddened. She started the car again—more screeching and grinding. Mr. Kutchner called out more instructions. "Easy now. Let your foot off the clutch and give her some gas!" The car lurched forward and bounded toward the road like a jackrabbit. "Brake!" The car skidded to a stop at the end of the drive.

Hildemara had never heard Papa swear before. "Marta! Stop! You're going to kill yourself!"

Mama stuck her arm out the window, waved, and turned right. The car lurched down the road; Papa, Bernie, Clotilde, and Rikka ran to the end of the driveway. Hildemara climbed the chinaberry tree, where she could keep watch. The car picked up speed. "She's all right, Papa! They're going over the hill right now. They're still on the road."

Papa dragged both hands through his hair. He walked in a circle, muttering in German. "Pray your mother doesn't kill herself!" He headed back for the barn.

Bernie and the girls sat on the front steps, waiting.

"Here they come!" Hildemara shouted from the top of the tree. Bernie and the girls ran to the edge of the lawn. Hildemara came down the tree fast and joined the others.

Mama whizzed by, waving her hand out the window, Mr. Kutchner shouting. "Slow down! Slow down!" And off they went in the opposite direction.

Hildemara raced up the tree again while Bernie and Cloe jumped up and down, cheering. "We have a car! We have a car!" Dash, confused, barked wildly.

Standing on tiptoes on a high branch, Hildemara craned her neck, trying to keep the car in sight, afraid any minute Mama would drive off the road and Papa's prophecy might prove true. "Here she comes again!" Hildemara made it down the tree and ran with the others to the edge of the grass.

The car raced toward them. Mr. Kutchner, face white, was yelling instructions. Slowing, Mama turned in to the driveway, a wide grin on her face. Hildemara joined Bernie and the girls running for the yard.

"Don't get in her way!" Papa shouted. "Give her room!"

Dash gave chase until Mama honked the horn. He let out a yip and ran for the barn, tail between his legs. The chickens squawked and fluttered wildly in the henhouse.

"Brake!" Mr. Kutchner yelled. *"Push the brake!"* The car jerked to a stop, shook violently like an animal run hard and worn-out. Sputtering, it coughed once and died.

Mama got out with a grin broader than Bernie's. Mr. Kutchner got out on wobbly legs, wiped his perspiring face with a handkerchief, and shook his head. He swore in German.

Mama laughed. "Well, there isn't much to it, is there? Once you learn how to use the clutch, the rest is easy. Just push down hard on the gas pedal."

Mr. Kutchner leaned against the car. "And the brakes. Don't forget about the brakes."

"I'll give you a ride back to town."

Mr. Kutchner grimaced. "Give me a minute." He ran for the outhouse.

Bernie climbed into the car. "When can I learn to drive?"

Mama grabbed him by the ear and hauled him out yowling. "When you're sixteen, and not a minute before."

Hildemara felt queasy just thinking about riding in it. Papa came out of the barn, raked his hands through his hair, and went back in again.

Mr. Kutchner returned and smiled tightly. "I think I'll walk, Marta. I don't want to take you away from making dinner for your family."

"Get in, you coward. I'll have you in Murietta in a few minutes."

"That's what I'm afraid of." When Papa came out of the barn again, Mr. Kutchner called out to him with a feeble grin. "Pray for me, Niclas."

"You had to do it, didn't you?" He said something in German.

"That's no way to talk to a friend, Niclas." Mama started the car. No lurching this time. She drove smoothly to the end of the driveway, stopped, and pulled out.

Hildemara counted the minutes, praying Mama wouldn't have an accident. She heard the car coming. Mama made a wide turn into the yard, and another to the right, heading straight for the barn. Papa let out a stream of German. The horses screamed and kicked at their stalls. Papa shouted again. The car sputtered and died. A door slammed and Mama marched out of the barn, heading for the house. "You're not parking that thing in the barn, Marta!"

"Fine! You move it!"

Mama hummed while making supper. "Bernhard, tell your father dinner is ready."

Papa came in, washed, and sat, face grim. Bowing his head, he said a terse prayer, then carved the roast like a harried butcher. Mama poured milk for each, patted Papa on the shoulder, and took her seat. Papa passed the platter of mangled beef to Bernie. "I want that car out of the barn."

"It'll be out of the barn as soon as you build a shelter."

"More expense." He glared. "More work."

"The Musashi boys will be happy to help. Just tell them I'll take them for a ride. We'll have a shelter up by Saturday afternoon."

Hildemara watched the pulse throb in Papa's temple. "We'll talk more about this later."

Papa read the Twenty-third Psalm that night and then said, "Bedtime." He usually read for half an hour, at the very least.

Bernie came through the back door last, muttering. "Ring the bell. Round one starting."

Hildemara lay on the top bunk, listening to Mama and Papa fight inside the house.

"What did you pay for that piece of junk?"

"Less than you did for that second horse!"

"The car stinks!"

"And horses smell like roses!"

"Manure is useful."

"And plenty deep around here!"

Papa exploded in German.

"English!" Mama shouted back. "We're in America, remember?"

"I'm going to tell Lucas to come and get that car and—"

"Over my dead body!"

“That’s what I’m trying to prevent!”

“Where’s your faith, Niclas?”

“This isn’t about faith!”

“God’s already counted our days. Isn’t that what Scripture says? I’ll die when God plans for me to die and not before. You’re just afraid of driving it!”

“I don’t see the sense in taking needless risks. People have gotten along without cars for this long—”

“Yes, and people died younger in those days, too. I’m exhausted most of the time, walking back and forth to town. With that car, I can be home in minutes. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll have time one of these days to read a book just for the pure pleasure of it!” Her voice broke. She said something in German, her voice stressed and frustrated.

Papa spoke more quietly, his voice a gentle rumble, words low and indistinct.

Hildemara let out her breath slowly, knowing the war was over and they had negotiated a truce. Cloe snored loudly on the lower bunk. Rikka lay curled on her side looking like a little angel in blue flannel pajamas. They never worried about anything.

Mama and Papa talked for a long time, their voices muffled. No more clashing swords, no more cannons firing. Only the low drone of two people talking out their differences.

* * *

The car did make life easier. It opened up the world for Hildemara. Every Sunday after church, Mama took them for a ride, packing a picnic and sometimes going as far as the Merced River.

Papa never came along, but he stopped worrying. Or said he did. “Be careful.” He’d brush Mama’s cheek. “And bring them all back in one piece.” Papa liked being alone. Sometimes he’d go out in the orchard and sit under one of the almond trees, and read his Bible all afternoon. Hildemara understood him. She liked to hide herself away in the chinaberry tree and listen to the bees hum in the blossoms.

The car came in handy when Cloe got sick. Mama loaded her in the car and took her to town. “She has mumps.” Hildemara and Rikki moved out of the bedroom, but not soon enough—they both came down with it, as did Bernie a few days later. He had it far worse than anyone. His face swelled so much, he didn’t look like Bernie anymore. When the pain moved down low in his body making him swell in places Mama wouldn’t talk about, Bernie screamed out in pain

whenever moved or washed. He begged Mama to do something, anything, to make it stop. "Mama . . . Mama . . ." He cried and Hildie cried harder than he did, wishing she could take his suffering on herself. She climbed down from her bunk at night and prayed over him.

"Stop that!" Mama snarled, finding her there one night. "You want him to wake up and see you hovering over him like the angel of death? Leave your brother alone and get back to bed!"

Bernie got better, and Hildemara came down with a cold. It got worse, changing from sniffles and a sore throat to a chest cold. Mama moved Hildemara into Bernie's room and Bernie into the living room. Mama made poultices, but they didn't help. She made chicken soup, but Hildemara didn't feel up to eating anything. "You have to try, Hildemara. You're going to waste away if you don't eat something." It hurt to breathe.

Papa talked to Mama in the hallway. "I don't think it's a cold. She'd be getting better by now."

Hildemara covered her head with a pillow. When Mama came in, she sobbed. "I'm sorry, Mama." She didn't want to be the cause of a quarrel. The cough started and she couldn't stop it. The spasm lasted for a long time, deep, wracking, rattling.

Mama looked scared. When it finally passed, Hildemara fell limp, gasping for breath. Mama felt her skin. "Night sweats." Her voice had a tremor. "Niclas!" Papa came running. "Help me get her in the car. I'm taking her to the doctor now." Mama bundled Hildemara like a baby.

Papa carried her out to the car. "She weighs less than a sack of flour."

"I hope it's not what I think it is."

Lying on the backseat, Hildemara bounced up and down as Mama drove to town. "Come on, now. Help me." Mama pulled Hildemara into a sitting position and lifted her. "Put your arms around my neck and your legs around my waist. Try, Hildemara Rose." She didn't have the strength.

She awakened on a table, Dr. Whiting bending over her, something cold pressed against her chest. Exhausted, Hildemara couldn't keep her eyes open. She thought she could stop breathing and not even care. It would be so easy.

Someone took her hand and patted it. Hildemara opened her eyes to see a woman in white standing over her. She dabbed Hildemara's

forehead with a cool cloth and spoke in a sweet voice. She held Hildemara's wrist. "I'm checking your pulse, sweetheart." She kept talking, quietly. She had such a pleasant voice. Hildemara felt as though she heard from a distance. "You rest now."

Hildemara felt better just listening to her. "Are you an angel?"

"I'm a nurse. My name is Mrs. King."

Hildemara closed her eyes and smiled. Finally, she knew what she wanted to be when she grew up.

## Hoofstuk 24

Soms sal Mamma ’n stowwerige, moeë verkoopsman nooi om binne te kom. Dan maak sy ’n toebroodjie, koffie en sit ’n rukkie na sy hartseer verhaal en luister. Hildemara luister terwyl sy deur die Amerikaanse geskiedenisboeke blaai wat Mamma by die biblioteek uitgeneem het. Sy en Pappa moet ’n burgerskaptoets aflê, en Mamma het besluit dat die kinders ook alles moet leer.

Mamma het almal behalwe Rikka opdrag gegee om die Handves van Regte en Lincoln se Gettysburg-rede te memoriseer. Hulle word ook die Grondwet en Amendemente ingedril. “Rikka is klaar ’n Amerikaanse burger, want sy is hier gebore.” Sy knyp Rikka se neusie. “Maar moenie dink jy gaan sommer net so wegkom nie. Wanneer jy ouer is, gaan jy al hierdie goed leer sodat jy nie soos die meeste Amerikaners is wat hulle vryheid as vanselfsprekend aanvaar nie. Hulle kla oor alles, maar doen nie eens die moeite om te gaan stem nie.”

Soms, net om van Mamma se dinge af weg te kom, klim Hildemara in die seringboom in die voortuin om tussen die lowerryke takke weg te kruip. Sy is amper twaalf en hou daarvan om hoog te sit van waar sy haar wêreld kan sien.

Mamma maak ’n venster oop en Hildemara hoor die vinnige geklik soos Cloe die naaimasjien trap. Sy het nog ’n naaldwerkprojek aangepak, hierdie keer ’n rok vir Rikki. Rikki sit op die voorste trappies met ’n fles waarin sy ’n skoenlapper gevang het. Sy bestudeer dit aandagtig, ’n potlood en tekenblok langs haar. Hildemara weet dat haar sussie die fles sal oopmaak wanneer sy klaar geteken het en die skoenlapper sal vrylaat. Vandat Pappa vir haar gesê het dat sommige van hulle net ’n paar dae lewe, het sy hulle nog nooit vir meer as ’n paar uur gehou nie. Pappa lei die perde na die skuur toe. Bernie verdwyn in die stortgeboutjie. Oorkant die straat is die Musashi-dogters besig om tussen die aarbeie te skoffel.

Sy leun teen die stam en luister na die gezoem van insekte, geritsel van blare en die voëltjies se gekwetter. Dis asof elkeen sy plekkie in die lewe het. Pappa is lief vir boer. Mamma is aan die stuur van die

huis, rekeninge en kinders. Bernie droom daarvan om bome te ent en plantproduksie te verbeter. Mamma sê Clotilde het genoeg talent om ’n beter naaldwerkster as haar eie ma te wees. Rikki gaan ’n kunstenaar wees.

Dis vir Hildie lekker om so in die boom te sit, om by die huis op die plaas te bly en naby Mamma en Pappa te wees, selfs wanneer Mamma geïrriteerd raak omdat sy nie “iets kry om te doen” nie.

Mamma maak die voordeur oop. “Klim af daar, Hildemara. Jy het nou lank genoeg gesit en droom. Daar is werk om te doen.”

Lucas Kutchner, nog ’n Duitse immigrant, kom die aand weer daar eet. Pappa het hom in die dorp ontmoet waar hy as meganikus werk. Hy werk aan fietse en motors en enigiets anders wat gebreek het, insluitend pompe en horlosies. “Hy kan enigiets regmaak,” het Pappa vir Mamma gesê toe hy hulle die eerste keer aan mekaar voorgestel het. Meneer Kutchner het nie ’n vrou nie en ken nie baie mense in die dorp nie.

Terwyl Mamma kos maak, sit hy en Pappa by die kombuistafel en praat oor politiek, godsdiens en die feit dat treine en motors besig is om waens te vervang. Soms bring meneer Kutchner klere wat reggemaak moet word en dan is dit Clotilde wat ’n knoop vaswerk of ’n soom insit.

Meneer Kutchner glo in dieselfde reëls as Mamma en kom nooit met leë hande daar aan nie. Die eerste keer het hy ’n pakkie sjokolade gebring, en Mamma het sommer van hom gehou. Hy het ’n motor soos dié van die Herkners, en hy laat Bernie toe om agter die stuur te sit en te maak of hy bestuur. Meneer Kutchner neem Pappa op ’n keer uit vir ’n rit. Pappa vee die sweet en stof van sy gesig af toe hy uitklim. Meneer Kutchner klap op die enjinkap. “Nou toe, Niclas, wat dink jy? Is jy gereed om een te koop? Ek kan vir jou een teen ’n goeie prys kry.”

“Ek het twee goeie perde en twee goeie voete. Ek het nie ’n motor nodig nie.” Pappa sê dit met soveel oortuiging dat meneer Kutchner die saak nie weer ophaal nie.

Mamma gaan eendag dorp toe en kom op die voorste sitplek van Lucas Kutchner se motor terug met Rikka op haar skoot. Nadat sy die deur oopgemaak en uitgeklim het, sit sy Rikka op die grond neer. Hildemara staan op van waar sy in die groentetuin besig is. Daar is ’n blos op Mamma se gesig en haar oë is helder. “Hildemara! Kom kyk na jou sussie.” Bernie hou op grawe aan die groot put naby die tuin. Hy gooi die graaf op die grond neer en kom kyk.

Die motor stotter ’n paar keer, hoes een maal en gaan dood.

Meneer Kutchner klim uit en daar is ’n groot glimlag op sy gesig. “Wat dink jy van haar, Marta?”

Mamma se uitdrukking verander. Sy trek haar skouers op toe sy na hom kyk. “Nie veel nie. Hy hyg en steun meer as enige siek dier wat ek al versorg het.”

Meneer Kutchner lyk verbaas. “Sy het ’n bietjie werk nodig, maar ek kan haar regmaak. Ek sal julle ’n goeie prys gee.”

Hildie sê Rikka aan om huis toe te gaan en haar tekenboek te gaan haal voordat sy Bernie na die werf toe volg. “Gaan Mamma die kar koop?”

“’n Perd loop beter!”

“’n Kar loop vinniger en kan langer aanhou!”

Mamma gee Bernie ’n kyk wat hom stilmaak, maar sy oë is vasgenael op die blink swart motor. “Het ek vir jou opinie gevra, Bernhard Waltert?”

“Nee, Mamma.”

“Gaan grawe jy dan maar jou gat.”

Bernie slaak ’n martelaarsug en gaan terug. Rikka en Cloe kom by die agterdeur uit en gaan sit op die trap.

Mamma plant haar hande op haar heupe. “Die bande lyk ook nie watwonders nie.”

“Hulle moet net ’n bietjie gepomp word.”

“Ek gaan nie ’n motor sonder nuwe bande koop nie.”

“Bande kos geld.”

“Nes naaldwerk en some insit. Nes vleis, rys en aartappels. Nie dat jy nie altyd welkom is nie, natuurlik.”

Meneer Kutchner krap sy kop en lyk effens beneweld. Mamma wil glimlag, maar sluk dit gou. Sy loop na die motor toe en streel oor die kap soos wat sy oor ’n siek koei sou streel. Hildie weet dat haar ma reeds haar besluit geneem het. Sy het nog net ’n bietjie afstry-werk om te doen. Meneer Kutchner sien hoe sy aan die kar raak en weet dat hy ’n koper het. “As ek met haar klaar is, loop sy soos ’n nuwe kar.”

Mamma neem haar hand weg en kyk hom vas in die oë. “As sy soos ’n Switserse horlosie werk, kan ons praat. En nog iets, Lucas. Ek en jy weet albei dat die motor nie werd is wat jy vir haar vra nie. Dalk moet jy weer probeer om hierdie kar aan Niclas te verkoop. Hoor wat hy van jou aanbod sê.” Sy begin huis toe loop. “Dankie vir die saamry, Lucas. Dis gaaf dat jy my toevallig sien huis toe loop het. Ook maar die Voorsienigheid, nè?”

"Nou goed!" roep meneer Kutchner uit. "Wag 'n bietjie!" Hy loop agter haar aan. "Kom ons praat nou daaroor."

Mamma steek vas en draai stadig om, haar kop skeef. "Gaan kry aartappels en wortels vir ete, Hildemara."

Hildemara neem haar tyd met die uittrek van die wortels en aartappels terwyl sy 'n oog op Mamma hou. Sy wonder wat Pappa oor haar gesprek met Lucas Kutchner te sê gaan hê. Toe hulle hand skud, weet Hildemara wat dit beteken. Meneer Kutchner loop terug na die motor toe en skud die stof van sy voete af voordat hy inklim en die enjin aanskakel. Mamma waai. Toe hy by die grootpad indraai, doen sy 'n klein dansie en lag.

Hildie tel die mandjie vuil aartappels en wortels op en kry haar by die agterdeur. Cloe staan op van die trappie waarop sy gesit het. "Pappa gaan Mamma doodmaak."

"Het Mamma dit gedoen?" gil Bernie.

Bernie kan soos gewoonlik nie sy mond hou nie. Die oomblik toe Pappa gaan sit, kom dit met 'n breë glimlag van hom: "Het Mamma hom al van die kar vertel?"

Pappa kyk vinnig op. "Watter kar?"

"Lucas Kutchner het Mamma vandag 'n geleentheid met sy kar gegee. Hy het dit aan haar probeer verkoop." Hy skep vir hom nog aartappels *au gratin* in. "Hy kan amper 40 myl per uur ry!"

"Ek dink nie Lucas het naastenby so vinnig gery toe hy my en Rikka huis toe gebring het nie."

Die rooi kruip van Pappa se nek oor sy gesig. Hy sit sy mes en vurk neer en kyk na Mamma terwyl sy haar hoenderdytjie sny. Hildemara byt op haar lip en kyk van die een na die ander.

"Ons het nie 'n kar nodig nie, Marta. Ons het nie die geld nie."

"Jy het gesê ons het nie 'n wasmasjien nodig nie. Ek sou nog steeds daardie emmer moes gebruik as ek daardie twee dollar nie self gespaar het nie."

"'n Wasmasjien het nie brandstof en bande nodig nie!"

"Net spierkrag."

"'n Wasmasjien het nie 'n meganikus nodig om dit aan die gang te hou nie."

"Jy weet hoe om lokomotiewe reg te maak."

Pappa praat al hoe harder. "'n Wasmasjien gaan nie met jou in 'n boom of 'n sloot inry of omslaan en jou onder 'n hoop verwronge metaal begrawe nie!"

Rikka begin huil. "Mamma, moenie die kar koop nie."

Mamma vra Bernie om die wortels aan te gee. "Ek het Lucas nie 'n sent gegee nie."

"Ek's bly om dit te hoor." Pappa klink verlig, maar nie heeltemal oortuig nie. Hy hou 'n waaksame oog oor haar terwyl hy eet.

Mamma vat 'n hap aartappels *au gratin* en kyk na die plafon terwyl sy kou. Pappa frons. "Ek het een maal in daardie kontrepsie van hom gery en my lewe voor my oë sien verbyflits."

Mamma snuif. "Ek gee toe, Lucas is nie 'n watwonderse bestuurder nie. As hy dalk meer op die pad gekyk en minder gepraat het ... "

Pappa versteen. "Wat weet jy van bestuur?"

"Niks nie. Net mooi niks nie." Sy neem 'n rolletjie en begin dit met botter smeer. "Nog nie." Sy bring die rolletjie na haar mond toe. "Dit lyk nie so vreeslik moeilik nie."

"Ek hoor dit voel of jy vlieg!" Bernie kan hom eenvoudig nie inhou nie.

Pappa snork. "Dis meer soos die dood wat jou van voor af inhaal."

Mamma lag.

"Wat wou meneer Kutchner vir die kar hê, Mamma?"

Pappa gluur hom aan. "Eet jou kos! Dit maak nie saak wat Lucas wil hê nie. Ons gaan dit nie koop nie! Ons het twee perde en 'n wa! Dis al wat ons nodig het." Pappa lyk kwaad.

Mamma lig haar hande in 'n ligte gebaar. "Hoekom stem ons nie daaroor nie?"

"Ek stem ja!" roep Bernie uit. Cloe en Rikka steek hulle hande op, maar kyk nie na Pappa nie.

"Wat van jou, Hildemara?"

Sy kyk na haar pa. "Ek bly buite stemming."

"Hoekom is ek nie verbaas nie?" Mamma frons vir haar. "Maak nie saak nie. Die ja's wen sonder jou."

"Daar word ook net gestem as jy weet hoe die stemme gaan val," mompel Pappa. "Ek hoop nie jy verongeluk jouself of een van ons kinders wanneer jy in daardie ding klim nie."

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Lucas Kutchner kom die Vrydag na skool uit plaas toe, Mamma op die passasiersitplek. Rikka klim voor uit die motor. Bernie en Hildemara hardloop werf toe om te hoor wat Mamma gaan sê. Pappa kom uit die skuur en staan hande in die sy en kyk. Meneer Kutchner roep hallo,

maar Pappa draai om en verdwyn weer in die skuur. Meneer Kutchner gryns verleë toe hy weer na Mamma draai terwyl sy rondom die motor loop. “Nou ja? Wat dink jy?”

“Niclas het gesê jy is ’n goeie meganikus.”

“Nuwe bande ook.” Hy skop na die een.

“Ek sien so.”

“Dis ’n goeie prys.”

“Dis ’n billike prys.”

“Dis beter as billik. Dis die beste kopie wat jy ooit in jou hele lewe sal doen.”

“Ek twyfel. Net een laaste sakie, Lucas.”

Meneer Kutchner lyk agterdogtig en verontreg. “Wat nou?”

“Jy moet my leer bestuur.”

“O!” Meneer Kutchner lag. “Nou toe, klim in! Dis kinderspeletjies.”

Pappa kom agter uit. “Marta!” roep hy skerp waarskuwend.

Sy klim voor in en sit haar hande op die stuurwiel. “Kyk na jou sussie, Hildemara, en bly uit die pad uit. Ek wil nie oor iemand ry nie.”

“Marta!”

“Gaan roskam jou perde!” Mamma skakel die kar aan.

Cloe storm by die agterdeur uit. “Gaan sy dit doen? Gaan sy?”

“Bly net daar!” gil Pappa.

Die rammelkas krys protesterend. Rikka druk haar ore verskrik toe en skree. Meneer Kutchner gil iets. Die kar ruk ’n paar keer vorentoe en sny uit. Pappa lag. “Ek hoop jy het dit nie gekoop nie!”

Mamma word rooi in die gesig. Sy skakel die kar weer aan en daar is weer ’n geskraap en geskuur. Meneer Kutchner gil nog instruksies. “Stadig nou. Lig jou voet van die koppelaar en trap die versneller stadig in!” Die kar spring vorentoe en hop-hop soos ’n prêriehaas oor die pad. “Briiieeeek!” Die motor skuur tot stilstand aan die einde van die oprit.

Hildemara het Pappa nog nooit hoor vloek nie. “Marta! Stop! Jy gaan jouself verongeluk!”

Mamma steek haar arm deur die venster, waai en draai regs. Die kar ruk in die pad af; Pappa, Bernie, Clotilde en Rikka hardloop tot by die grootpad. Hildemara gaan klim in die seringboom van waar sy die spulletjie kan dophou. Die motor versnel. “Sy kom reg, Pappa! Hulle is besig om oor die heuwel te gaan. Hulle is nog steeds op die pad.”

Pappa trek albei hande deur sy hare. Hy loop in ’n sirkel terwyl hy in Duits prewel. “Bid dat jou ma nie haarself verongeluk nie!”

Bernie en die meisies sit op die voorste trappies en wag.

“Hier kom hulle!” gil Hildemara bo uit die boom. Bernie en haar sussies hardloop tot waar die grasperk ophou. Hildemara klim vinnig af en gaan staan by hulle.

Mamma skiet verby en waai deur die venster. Meneer Kutchner gil: “Stadiger! Stadiger!” En daar trek hulle weer in die teenoorgestelde rigting.

Hildemara klouter weer in die boom terwyl Bernie en Cloe jillend rondspring. “Ons het ’n kar! Ons het ’n kar!” Dash blaf wild en ’n bietjie verward.

Hildemara staan op haar tone op ’n hoë tak en moet haar nek rek om die motor te volg, bang dat Mamma enige oomblik van die pad af sal ry en Pappa se profesie vervul sal word. “Hier kom sy weer!” Hildemara is rats teen die boom af en hardloop saam met die ander tot op die rand van die grasperk.

Die motor jaag op hulle af. Meneer Kutchner is wit in die gesig terwyl hy instruksies gil. Mamma ry stadiger en draai by die oprit in, ’n breë glimlag op haar gesig. Hildemara hardloop saam met Bernie en die ander terug huis toe.

“Uit die pad uit!” gil Pappa. “Maak plek vir haar!”

Dash hardloop al voor haar in totdat Mamma die toeter druk. Hy gee ’n tjankie en hardloop stert tussen die bene skuur toe. Die hoenders kekkel en fladder wild in hulle hok.

“Briek!” gil meneer Kutchner. “*Gebruik die briek!*” Die motor ruk tot stilstand en skud hortend soos ’n dier wat lank en hard gehardloop het. Sy sluk, hoes een maal en vrek.

Toe Mamma uitklim, is haar glimlag groter as Bernie s’n. Nadat meneer Kutchner uit die motor gestruikelval het, vee hy sy beswete gesig met ’n sakdoek af en skud sy kop. Hy vloek in Duits.

Mamma lag. “Kinderspeletjies. As ’n mens eers verstaan hoe die koppelaar werk, is die res maklik. Trap die versneller net lekker diep in.”

Meneer Kutchner leun teen die motor. “En die briek. Moenie van die briek vergeet nie.”

“Ek sal jou terugvat dorp toe.”

Meneer Kutchner gryns. “Gee my net ’n oomblik.” Hy hardloop na die kleinhuisie toe.

Bernie klim in die motor. “Wanneer kan ek leer bestuur?”

Mamma gryp hom aan die oor en sleep hom kermend uit. “Die dag as jy sestien word en nie ’n oomblik vroeër nie.”

Die blote gedagte aan ’n rit laat Hildemara skoon naar voel. Pappa kom uit die skuur uit, trek sy hande deur sy hare en gaan weer in.

Meneer Kutchner kom terug en glimlag stywerig. “Ek dink ek sal sommer loop, Marta. Jy wil seker begin kos maak vir jou gesin.”

“Klim in, bangbroek. Ek sal jou binne ’n paar minute in Murietta hê.”

“Dis waarvoor ek bang is.” Toe Pappa weer by die skuur uitkom, roep meneer Kutchner met ’n flou glimlag in sy rigting. “Bid vir my, Niclas.”

“Jy kon jouself nie help nie, nè? Jy moes net.” Hy sê iets in Duits.

“Dis nie hoe ’n mens met ’n vriend praat nie, Niclas.” Mamma skakel die enjin aan. Hierdie keer is dit sonder horte en stote. Sy bestuur meer besadig tot by die grootpad, hou stil en ry weg.

Hildemara tel die minute en bid dat Mamma nie ’n ongeluk sal maak nie. Dan hoor sy die motor kom. Mamma kom die werf met ’n wye draai binnegery, en dan draai sy regs, reguit op pad skuur toe. Pappa skree iets in Duits. Die perde runnik en skop in hulle stalle. Pappa gil weer. Die motor gee ’n paar rukke en vrek. ’n Deur klap en Mamma kom uit die skuur gemarsjeer. “Jy gaan hierdie ding nie in die skuur parkeer nie, Marta!”

“Nou goed! Skuif hom dan!”

Mamma neurie terwyl sy kos maak. “Bernhard, gaan sê vir jou pa hy kan kom eet.”

Pappa kom in, was en gaan sit met ’n strak gesig. Nadat hy stug gebid het, sny hy die vleis soos ’n ontstoke slagter. Mamma skink vir elkeen ’n glas melk, klop Pappa op die skouer en gaan sit. Pappa gee die bord versnipperde vleis vir Bernie. “Ek soek daardie kar nie in die skuur nie.”

“Sodra jy ’n afdak gebou het, sal jy jou skuur weer vir jouself hê.”

“Nog uitgawes.” Hy gluur haar aan. “Nog werk.”

“Die Musashi-seuns sal graag help. Sê net ek sal ’n draai met hulle gaan ry. Ons sal teen Sagterdagmiddag ’n afdak hê.”

Hildemara kyk hoe die aar in Pappa se slaap klop. “Ons sal later verder hieroor praat.”

Pappa lees Psalm 23 en sê dan: “Slaaptyd.” Hy lees gewoonlik minstens ’n halfuur.

Bernie kom laaste by die agterdeur uit. “Lui die klok. Die eerste ronde het begin.”

Hildemara lê op die boonste bed en luister hoe Mamma en Pappa binnekant baklei.

“Wat het jy vir daardie stuk gemors betaal?”
“Minder as wat jy vir daardie tweede perd betaal het!”
“Die kar stink!”
“En die perde ruik natuurlik soos rose!”
“Mis kan gebruik word.”
“En ons het ’n oormaat daarvan!”
Pappa ontplof in Duits.
“Engels!” gil Mamma terug. “Ons is in Amerika, onthou?”
“Ek gaan sê Lucas moet daardie kar kom haal en – ”
“Oor my dooie liggaam!”
“Dis wat ek probeer voorkom!”
“Waar is jou geloof, Niclas?”
“Dit gaan nie hier oor geloof nie!”
“God het alreeds beskik hoe lank ons gaan lewe. Dit staan so in die Bybel. Ek sal doodgaan wanneer die Here besluit en nie vroeër nie. Jy is net bang om te bestuur!”
“Ek sien nie die nut van ’n onnodige risiko nie. Tot op hede het mense sonder motors klaargekom – ”
“Ja, en in die ou dae het mense ook vroeër doodgegaan. Ek is die meeste van die tyd uitgeput van dorp toe loop en terug. Met daardie kar kan ek binne ’n paar minute by die huis wees. En dalk, net dalk, sal ek oor ’n rukkie die tyd hê om ’n boek sommer vir die lekker te lees!” Haar stem breek. Sy sê iets in Duits, haar stem gespanne en gefrustreerd.
Pappa praat sagter, sy stem nou ’n rustige dreuning.
Hildemara laat haar asem stadig uit. Die oorlog is verby en hulle het ’n wapenstilstand bereik. Cloe snork hard op die onderste bed. Rikka lê opgekrul op haar sy en lyk soos ’n engeltjie in haar blou flenniepajamas. Hulle bekommer hulle nooit oor enigiets nie.
Mamma en Pappa praat lank in gedempte stemme. Daar is nie meer die gekap van swaarde of kanonskote nie. Net die lae dreuning van twee mense wat hulle verskille uitpraat.

* * *

Die kar maak die lewe tog makliker. Dit maak die wêreld vir Hildemara oop. Elke Sondag na kerk gaan ry Mamma met hulle. Daar word ’n piekniekmandjie ingepak en soms ry hulle so ver as die Mercedrivier.

Pappa kom nooit saam nie, maar hy bekommer hom nie meer nie. Dis altans wat hy sê. "Wees versigtig." Hy sal oor Mamma se wang streel. "En bring almal in een stuk huis toe." Pappa hou daarvan om alleen te wees. Soms sal hy na die boord toe gaan en die hele middag daar sit en Bybel lees. Hildemara verstaan hom. Sy hou daarvan om haar in die seringboom te gaan tuismaak en na die bye se gezoem in die blomme te luister.

Die motor kom handig te pas toe Cloe siek word. Mamma laai haar in die kar en neem haar dorp toe. "Sy het pampoentjies." Hildemara en Rikka skuif na die voorkamer, maar dis reeds te laat – hulle albei het aangesteek, en 'n paar dae later het Bernie dit ook. Hy het dit baie erger as die res. Sy gesig is so geswel dat hy nie meer soos Bernie lyk nie. Toe die pyn in sy lyf afbeweeg en hy op plekke swel waaroor Mamma nie wil praat nie, skreeu Bernie van die pyn wanneer hy beweeg of moet was. Hy smeek Mamma om iets, enigiets te doen om dit te laat ophou. "Mamma ... Mamma ... " huil hy en Hildie huil harder as hy. Sy wens sy kon sy pyn op haar neem. Sy klim snags van haar bed af en gaan bid vir hom.

"Staak dit!" blaf Mamma toe sy haar een nag daar aantref. "Wil jy hê hy moet wakker word en jou soos die doodsengel bokant hom sien staan? Los jou broer uit en gaan klim in die bed!"

Bernie word beter, en dan kry Hildemara verkoue. Dit vererger en die gesnuif en seer keel verander in 'n borsverkoue. Mamma skuif Hildemara na Bernie se kamer en hy gaan slaap in die woonkamer. Mamma maak pappe, maar dit help nie. Sy maak hoendersop, maar Hildemara kry haarself nie so ver om enigiets te eet nie. "Jy moet probeer, Hildemara. Daar gaan niks van jou oorbly as jy nie iets eet nie." Dis seer om asem te haal.

Pappa praat met Mamma in die gang. "Ek dink nie dis 'n verkoue nie. Sy sou teen hierdie tyd al beter gewees het."

Hildemara lê met 'n kussing oor haar kop. Toe Mamma inkom, snik sy. "Ek's jammer, Mamma." Sy wil nie die oorsaak van 'n getwis wees nie. Dan begin sy hoes en kan nie ophou nie. Die spasma duur 'n ewigheid en dit voel asof iets in haar borskas skeur.

Mamma lyk bang. Toe dit uiteindelik verby is, is Hildemara flou en sy hyg na asem. Mamma voel aan haar voorkop. "Nagsweet." Haar stem bewe. "Niclas!" Pappa kom ingehardloop. "Help my om haar in die kar te kry. Ek vat haar nou dokter toe." Mamma wikkel Hildemara toe in 'n kombers.

Pappa dra haar. "Sy weeg minder as 'n sak meel."

“Ek hoop nie dis wat ek dink dit is nie.”

Hildemara lê op die agtersitplek terwyl Mamma bonsend oor die ongelyk pad dorp toe ry. “Toe, kom nou. Help my.” Mamma help Hildemara tot in ’n sittende posisie en tel haar op. “Sit jou arms om my nek en jou bene om my middel. Probeer, Hildemara Rose.” Sy het nie die krag nie.

Sy lê op ’n tafel toe sy wakker word. Dokter Whiting staan geboë oor haar en druk iets kouds teen haar bors. Hildemara voel te gedaan om haar oë oop te hou. Sy sal nie eens omgee om nou op te hou asemhaal nie. Dit sal so maklik wees.

Iemand neem haar hand en gee dit ’n drukkie. Toe Hildemara haar oë oopmaak, is daar ’n vrou in wit langs haar. Sy vee Hildemara se voorkop met ’n koel lappie af en praat in ’n sagte stem. Sy hou Hildemara se gewrig vas. “Ek neem net jou pols, liefie.” Sy hou saggies aan met praat. Sy het so ’n mooi stem. Dit voel vir Hildemara asof sy dit van ver af hoor. “Rus nou ’n bietjie.”

Net om na haar te luister laat Hildemara beter voel. “Is jy ’n engel?”

“Ek’s ’n verpleegster. My naam is mevrou King.”

Hildemara sluit haar oë en glimlag. Uiteindelik weet sy wat sy wil wees as sy groot is.

## Chapter 25

"The doctor said to keep her warm and get soup into her. She's thin as a rail." Mama sounded so grim.

"I'll set up a cot in the living room near the woodstove. We'll leave the bedroom door open."

Mama aired out the back porch bedrooms, changed all the linens, and moved Cloe and Rikka back into the small bedroom. Bernie got to return to his own bedroom. Mama made milk soup with a little sugar and flour. "Drink it, Hildemara. I don't care if you don't feel like it. Don't give up!" Hildemara tried, but coughed so much, she threw up what little she ate.

Mama and Papa talked quietly in the bedroom. "I've done everything the doctor said and she's still drowning in her own body fluids."

"All we can do is pray, Marta."

"*Pray!* Don't you think I have?"

"Don't stop."

Mama gave a sobbing breath. "If she wasn't so timid and weak, she might have a chance. I might have some hope. But she hasn't the courage to *fight*!"

"She's not weak. She just doesn't confront life the way you do."

"She just lies there like a dying swan, and I want to shake her."

Bernie, Clotilde, and Rikki went to school. Papa didn't work outside all day like he usually did, but Mama went outside more. Sometimes she was gone for a long time. Papa sat in his chair, reading his Bible.

"Where's Mama?"

"Walking. Praying."

"Am I going to die, Papa?"

"God decides, Hildemara." Papa rose and lifted Hildie from the cot. He sat in his chair again, settling her comfortably in his lap, her head resting against his chest. She listened to the steady beat of his heart. "Are you afraid, *Liebling*?"

"No, Papa." She felt warm and protected with his arms around her. If only Mama loved her as much as he did.

Mrs. King came twice. Hildemara asked how she became a nurse. "I trained at Merritt Hospital in Oakland. I lived there and worked while studying." She talked about the nurses she met and patients she tended. "You're the best I've ever had, Hildie. Not one peep of

complaint out of you, and I know pneumonia hurts. It's still hard to breathe, isn't it, honey?"

"I'm getting better."

Mrs. Carlson, the seventh-grade teacher, came to visit, and she brought a get-well card signed by every member of the class. "Your friends miss you, Hildemara. You come back as soon as you can."

Even her Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Jenson, and Pastor Michaelson came to visit. Mrs. Jenson said all the children were praying for her. Pastor put his hand on her head and prayed for her while Mama and Papa stood by, hands folded, heads bowed. He patted Mama's shoulder. "Don't give up hope."

"I won't give up. It's *her* I'm worried about."

Hildemara didn't know how many days passed, but one night everything had changed. A little spark flared inside her. Mama sat in Papa's chair reading a book on American history, even though she'd already passed the citizenship test and received a certificate and small American flag to prove it. "Mama, I'm not going to die."

Surprised, Mama lifted her head. She closed the book and set it aside. Leaning forward, she put her hand on Hildemara's forehead and let it rest there, cool and firm, like a blessing. "It's about time you made up your mind!"

* * *

It took two months to fully recover, and Mama didn't allow her to waste a minute of it. "You may not be strong enough to do chores or run and play like the rest, but you can read. You can study." Mrs. Carlson had brought out a list of assignments and tests Hildemara had missed, and Mama sat down and worked out a plan. "You're not just going to catch up. You're going to be ahead of the class before you go back."

Mama didn't just care about getting the right answers. She wanted penmanship that looked like artwork. She wanted spelling words written twenty times. She wanted sentences built around each and then an entire essay with every word woven in. She made up math problems that had Hildemara's head spinning. "What kind of math is this, Mama?"

"Algebra. It makes you think."

Hildemara hated being sick. Clotilde got to read magazines and cut out pictures of dresses. Rikka could doze by the radio, listening to classical music. Hildemara had to sit and read world history, American history, and ancient history. When she fell asleep reading, Mama

prodded her. “Sit at the kitchen table. You won’t fall asleep there. Read the chapter again. Aloud this time.” Mama peeled potatoes while Hildemara read. Mama bought a world map and pinned it on the wall, drilling Hildemara in geography. “With cars and aeroplanes, the world is getting smaller. You’d better know your neighbors. Where’s Switzerland? No. That’s Austria! Do you need glasses? Where’s Germany? Show me England—England, not Australia!” She didn’t let up until Hildemara could point out every country without a second’s hesitation.

When Clotilde complained about how much homework she had to do, Hildemara huffed. “I can’t wait to go back to school! It’ll be a vacation after having Mama for a teacher.”

Mama kept Hildemara on a tight regimen, overseeing what she ate, how much she slept, and most of all, what she learned. She only balked once, and she earned Mama’s ire. “I don’t care if European history isn’t on the list of assignments. I don’t care if it isn’t in your textbook. You need to learn about the world. If we don’t know history, we’re doomed to repeat it.”

Dr. Whiting said Hildemara could return to school. Mama decided to keep her home another month. “She needs to put on five pounds or she’ll catch the next bug that goes around.”

Mama allowed Hildemara to go back to school in time to take tests. When the results came back, Hildemara found herself at the head of the class. Mama congratulated her. “We had to make good use of all that sick time, didn’t we? Now we both know you’re smart enough to do anything.”

* * *

A letter came from Hedda Herkner a few weeks before school let out.

“Good news? Bad news?” Papa raised his brows.

“Depends.” Mama folded the letter. “It seems Fritz talked so much about his summer with us that some of his friends now want to come with him.”

“He’s coming back?”

“Didn’t I tell you? Anyway, Hedda says the parents think it would be good for their sons to learn about life on a farm. Living in the city, those boys wouldn’t have any idea. What do you think, Niclas?”

“Now you ask.”

“More boys!” Clotilde groaned.

Papa sighed. “How many?”

"Counting Bernhard and Fritz, we'd have six."

"Six? Do you think you can manage that many at once?"

"I wouldn't do it alone. Hildemara can help."

Hildemara closed her eyes and breathed slowly.

Mama dropped the letter as though she had stripped off gloves and cast a challenge at anyone who dared go against her. "I can make good money running a summer camp. And it's as close to owning a hotel and restaurant as I'll ever get. The parents want these boys to learn about farm life. So we're going to teach them about farm life."

"Oh, boy," Bernie grumbled. "Sounds like fun."

Hildemara could see her mother's wheels turning. Mama voiced her thoughts aloud. "No one will work more than half a day. With six boys, Papa will have the irrigation ditches dug in no time. They can help harvest grapes and almonds. They'll learn how to take care of horses, chickens, rabbits, milk a cow . . ." She drummed her fingers on the table. Hildemara wondered what part of all that she would have to help manage. "And it might not be a bad idea to have them build something."

Papa lowered his newspaper. "Build what?"

"How about adding a bathroom to the house? Bernhard's bedroom is big enough that four or five feet wouldn't be missed."

Bernie's head shot up from his studies. "Mama!"

"You'll be sleeping in the tree house all summer with the boys, making sure they don't get into trouble."

"An indoor bathroom?" Clotilde smiled broadly, dreamy-eyed. "With a real toilet? No more using the outhouse?"

"A toilet, a claw-foot tub, and a sink, I think." Mama didn't seem disturbed by the stormy look Papa gave her. "It's about time. Everyone in Murietta has an indoor bathroom."

"God, have mercy on me," Papa said under his breath and raised the newspaper again.

"Niclas?"

"Yes, Marta?"

"Yea or nay?"

"You're the money manager."

"And a telephone, right there on the wall."

"A telephone!" Clotilde beamed.

"For emergencies only," Mama added, staring at her.

Papa shook his paper and turned a page. "Sounds like bedlam to me."

* * *

June arrived in a haze of dust, blowing in Jimmy, Ralph, Gordon, Billie, and Fritz. Fritz had grown six inches in the past year, and he took relish in standing over Hildemara, who had grown barely two. Clotilde, however, could stare him in the eye. Fritz knew enough to bring only one small case with him. The other boys arrived with luggage unloaded from the back of family cars. "Rich boys," Clotilde whispered to Hildemara.

Hildemara sighed. Just watching the boyish excitement hinted at the work ahead. "This isn't going to be as easy as Mama thinks."

Mama invited the parents into the living room while Papa, Bernie, and Fritz took the new boys on a tour of the property. Hildie served tea, coffee, and angel food cake, while Mama explained the chores, projects, and recreational activities planned for the boys' "summer camp."

One mother looked dubious. "It seems like you expect them to do a lot of work."

"Yes, we do. And if you agree, I have a contract for you to sign. The boys won't be able to quibble if they know you back me up. Farming is very hard work. Your boys will learn to respect the people who provide food for the marketplace. And by the end of summer, they'll all want to be doctors and lawyers."

Smiling, the parents signed, kissed their sons good-bye for the summer, said they'd be back the end of August, and left.

No one cried.

Not on the first day.

Mama had the boys move their things into the tree house. "Stack your clothes under the bench and put those suitcases in the shed for storage." She let them play all afternoon. Hildemara listened to them whoop and holler, and she wondered how soon that noise would turn to petulant protests and whining. When Mama rang the dinner bell, they washed and ran for the house, taking their assigned seats at the table. Mama served a feast of beef Wellington and steamed garden vegetables soaked in butter. She announced dessert would be chocolate cake.

"Wow!" Ralph whispered to Fritz. "You said she's a good cook. You were right!"

While everyone ate, Mama laid out the rules and explained the daily schedule of chores and activities. "They're posted on the back door in case you forget." Hildemara knew they would. None of the

new boys bothered to listen closely. Fritz looked at Bernie and grinned with malicious delight.

The next morning, Mama awakened Hildemara before dawn. Resigned, Hildie got up without protest, put on her clothes, and went out to feed the chickens and collect enough eggs to feed their small army. Papa ate early and left “before the pandemonium starts.” Mama rang the triangle at six.

The boys stirred, but no one rose. Mama went down the steps and leaned six shovels against the base of the tree and called up to the boys. “Come on down. You have chores to do.” Only Bernie and Fritz did.

Mama rang the breakfast bell at eight. Bernie and Fritz came running. The new boys quickly came down the rope ladder and ran for the house. When they reached the back door, they found it latched. Jimmy tugged, then tugged again. “Hey, I think it’s locked.” They ran around to the front of the house and found that door locked. They stood on the porch, peering through the window at Bernie and Fritz eating a sumptuous breakfast of scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, and blueberry muffins.

“Hey!” Ralph called through the glass. “What about our breakfast?”

Mama poured hot chocolate into Fritz’s mug. “Read the sign over the back door, boys.” Their feet pounded down the steps. Hildemara watched their heads bob up and down as they ran around the side of the house. She knew what they’d find. *Those who don’t work, don’t eat.*

Rebellion came swiftly.

“My folks paid for me to have fun! Not work!”

“I’ll write to my parents and tell them she’s making us work!”

“You can’t do this.”

Though Hildemara cringed at their begging, Mama paid no attention. “They’ll learn.”

Replete and smirking, Bernie and Fritz went out the back door. Hildemara went to her room to rest for the next shift of work Mama would assign. The boys argued outside the screen windows. “You guys still whining?” Bernie rubbed his stomach. “You sure missed a good breakfast!”

“We didn’t come here to work!”

“Then don’t. Starve. It’s your choice.”

“I’m going to call my mother.” Gordon’s voice wobbled. Tears would come soon.

“Go ahead and call her, but you’ll have to walk to town to use a telephone. The one on the wall inside is for emergencies only.”

“What sort of a place is this?” Ralph yelled in anger. “We’re not slave labor.”

Bernie laughed. “Your parents signed you over to Mama. She owns you for the whole summer. Better get used to it, boys.”

“Hey!” Jimmy shoved Fritz. “You told us we’d have fun!”

“I said *I* had fun.” Fritz shoved back harder. “What a baby! It’s only a couple hours a day, and the rest of the time we do what we want.”

Bernie couldn’t resist. “As long as we don’t burn down any houses or barns.”

Hildemara sat up and looked out through the screen. “Bernie!”

“Okay! Okay!”

“You didn’t say anything about chores, Fritz! I don’t have any at home. Why do I have to do them here?”

Hildemara flopped down on her high bunk and shut her eyes, wishing they would stop squabbling. Cloe pumped away on the sewing machine on the other side of the wall in the living room. Somehow, Rikki had such an ability to concentrate, she didn’t hear the chaos outside as she lay on her bed, going through a library book on Rembrandt.

Merciless, Bernie went on mocking the city boys as he headed out toward the orchard to help Papa dig irrigation ditches. “You’d better come if you want lunch.”

“I’m not a ditchdigger!” Ralph yelled after him.

“You will be!” Fritz called back.

“Hildemara!” Mama called. “There’s a basket of laundry. Take it out to the washhouse and get it started.” Pushing herself up, Hildemara grabbed it, propped it on her hip, and opened the screen door. Jimmy, Ralph, Gordon, and Billie wandered like lost souls looking for something to do.

Bernie and Fritz came in from the orchard just before Mama rang the lunch bell. They stepped into the back of the house and latched the screen door before the others could open it. “Read the sign, boys!” Bernie and Fritz laughed and went into the house while the others milled around outside, their defiance wilting in the Central Valley summer heat.

After lunch, Bernie and Fritz took off running for the big irrigation ditch at the back of the property. “Come on, boys!” The

others didn't run as fast, but forgot their hunger long enough to enjoy themselves. Hildemara could hear them shrieking and laughing and shouting while she weeded the vegetable garden. She knew how her summer would go, and it would not be filled with play. When Mama rang the dinner bell, the boys all came running. Bernie and Fritz dove under Mama's arm and she closed the door, latching it again while Jimmy, Ralph, Gordon, and Billie gaped in misery.

"We're going to starve to death." Jimmy wiped tears away quickly.

"I gave you the rules last night, boys. I'm not in the habit of repeating myself. Tomorrow can be a fresh start. Depends on you." Mama turned her back on them and went into the house.

Fritz shook his head as he took his seat at the table. "I've never heard such whimpering and whining."

Hildemara glared at him. "Just like you last summer." She felt pity for the starving masses outside the back door.

Papa looked grim. "Those boys are going to run away."

"Let them run." Mama held out a bowl of potato dumplings to Fritz. "They'll find out soon enough they have no place to go."

Hildemara worried anyway. "What if they don't work tomorrow, Mama?" Would Mama end up handing *her* a shovel? Would she have to tend the chickens and rabbits and horses all by herself?

"Then they won't eat."

Mama went outside at six the next morning and rang the bell right under the tree house. "What do you say, boys? Are you ready to do your share of the work around here? For those who are, waffles with butter and hot maple syrup, crispy bacon, and steaming cocoa. Those who aren't can have water from the hose and air to eat."

All six boys came down the rope ladder and grabbed shovels.

An hour later, Hildemara poured cocoa and watched the new boys eat like starving wolf cubs. Mama held a platter of waffles in one hand and a fork in the other. "Anyone want a second helping?" Four hands shot into the air. "When you finish breakfast, take your shovels and report to Papa in the orchard. He'll tell you what to do next."

When Papa came in for lunch, he grinned at Mama. "Looks like you broke them." All six boys filed in, washed their hands at the kitchen sink, and took their assigned seats at the dinner table.

Mama held two platters of ham and cheese sandwiches. "Show me your hands, boys." They held them out. "Blisters! Good for you! You'll have calluses to show off before you go home. No one will ever

call you sissies.” She set the platters on the table. By the time Hildemara put out a bowl of grapes and apples, the platters were bare. Mama took her place at the foot of the table. “When you finish, the rest of the day is free time.”

Hildemara knew she wouldn’t be so lucky. She went back to the kitchen counter and made half a sandwich for herself.

## Hoofstuk 25

"Die dokter sê ons moet haar warm hou en kyk dat sy sop inkry. Sy's so maer soos 'n riet." Mamma klink stroef.

"Ek sal 'n bed in die woonkamer naby die houtstoof gaan sit, en ons kan die kamerdeur oop los."

Mamma gee die stoepkamers lug, trek al die beddens skoon oor en skuif Cloe en Rikka terug na hulle klein slaapkamer. Bernie gaan slaap weer in sy eie kamer. Mamma maak melkkos met 'n klein bietjie suiker en meel. "Drink dit, Hildemara. Ek gee nie om of jy lus is of nie. Moenie opgee nie!" Hildemara probeer, maar begin só hoes dat sy die bietjie opbring wat sy geëet het.

Mamma en Pappa praat sag in die slaapkamer. "Ek het alles gedoen wat die dokter gesê het en sy is nog steeds besig om in haar eie liggaamsvloeistowwe te verdrink."

"Al wat ons kan doen, is bid, Marta."

"*Bid!* Dink jy ek bid nie?"

"Moenie ophou nie."

Dit klink soos 'n snik toe Mamma haar asem intrek. "As sy nie so tingerig en swak was nie, het sy dalk 'n kans gehad. Dan het ek nog hoop gehad. Maar sy het nie die moed om te *baklei* nie!"

"Sy's nie swak nie. Sy is net nie 'n vegter soos jy nie."

"Sy lê net daar soos 'n sterwende swaan, en ek wil haar skud."

Bernie, Clotilde en Rikki gaan skool toe. Pappa werk nie die hele dag buite soos wat hy altyd doen nie, maar Mamma gaan meer as gewoonlik uit. Soms bly sy lank weg. Pappa sit op sy stoel en lees Bybel.

"Waar's Mamma?"

"Sy het gaan loop. En sy bid."

"Gaan ek doodgaan, Pappa?"

"Dis die Here wat daaroor besluit, Hildemara." Pappa staan op en tel Hildie uit die bed. Hy gaan sit weer op sy stoel en maak haar gemaklik op sy skoot, haar kop teen sy bors. Sy luister na die gelykmatige klop van sy hart. "Is jy bang, *Liebling*?"

“Nee, Pappa.” Sy voel warm en beskermd so met sy arms rondom haar. As Mamma tog maar net vir haar so lief was soos hy.

Mevrou King kom twee maal. Hildemara vra hoe sy ’n verpleegster geword het. “Ek is by die Merritt Hospitaal in Oakland opgelei. Ek het daar gebly en gewerk terwyl ek studeer het.” Sy praat oor die verpleegsters wat sy ontmoet het en die pasiënte wat sy versorg het. “Jy is die beste een wat ek al ooit gehad het, Hildie. Jy het nog nie een maal gekla nie, en ek weet longontsteking is ’n pynlike affêre. Dis seker steeds swaar om asem te haal.”

“Dit word beter.”

Mevrou Carlson, die graadsewe-onderwyseres, kom kuier en sy bring ’n kaartjie wat deur die hele klas onderteken is. “Jou vriende mis jou, Hildemara. Kom terug sodra jy kan.”

Selfs haar Sondagskoolonderwyseres, mevrou Jenson en pastoor Michaelson kom maak ’n draai. Mevrou Jenson sê al die kinders bid vir haar. Pastoor plaas sy hand op haar kop en bid vir haar terwyl Mamma en Pappa met gevoude hande en geboë hoofde staan. Hy gee Mamma se skouer ’n kloppie. “Moenie ophou hoop nie.”

“Ek sal nie opgee nie. Dis oor háár wat ek bekommerd is.”

Hildemara weet nie hoeveel dae verbygaan nie, maar een nag verander alles. ’n Klein vonkie vlam in haar op. Mamma sit op Pappa se stoel en lees ’n boek oor die Amerikaanse geskiedenis, selfs al het sy reeds die burgerskaptoets geslaag en ’n sertifikaat en klein Amerikaanse vlaggie as bewys daarvan ontvang. “Mamma, ek sal nie doodgaan nie.”

Mamma kyk verras op. Sy maak die boek toe en sit dit neer. Dan leun sy vooroor en sit haar hand op Hildemara se voorkop en laat dit daar rus, koel en ferm, asof om haar te seën. “Dis hoog tyd dat jy besluit wat jy wil doen!”

* * *

Dit neem twee maande voordat Hildemara heeltemal gesond is, en Mamma laat haar nie toe om ’n oomblik daarvan te verkwis nie. “Jy is dalk nie sterk genoeg om te werk en soos die ander te hardloop en speel nie, maar jy kan lees. Jy kan studeer.” Mevrou Carlson het ’n lys opdragte en toetse gebring wat Hildemara misgeloop het, en Mamma gaan sit om ’n rooster uit te werk. “Jy gaan nie net inhaal nie. Jy gaan voor jou klas wees wanneer jy teruggaan.”

Mamma is nie net begaan oor die regte antwoorde nie. Sy verwag ’n handskrif wat soos ’n kunswerk lyk. Hildemara moet haar spelwoorde 20 keer uitskryf en nadat sy sinne daarmee gemaak het, moet sy elkeen in ’n opstel gebruik. Mamma laat haar somme doen wat haar kop laat draai. “Watter soort wiskunde is dit, Mamma?”

“Algebra. Dit help ’n mens om te dink.”

Hildemara haat dit om siek te wees. Clotilde kan tydskrifte lees en prentjies van rokke uitknip. Rikka kan voor die radio insluimer terwyl daar klassieke musiek speel. Hildemara moet sit en boeke oor wêreldgeskiedenis, Amerikaanse geskiedenis en antieke geskiedenis lees. Wanneer sy aan die slaap raak, maak Mamma haar wakker. “Gaan sit by die kombuistafel. Jy sal nie daar aan die slaap raak nie. Gaan weer deur hierdie hoofstuk. Hierdie keer hardop.” Mamma skil aartappels terwyl Hildemara lees. Mamma koop ’n wêreldkaart wat sy teen die muur vasplak en dril Hildemara in aardrykskunde. “Met karre en vliegtuie is hierdie wêreld besig om al hoe kleiner te raak. Waar is Switserland? Nee. Dis Oostenryk! Het jy ’n bril nodig? Waar’s Duitsland? Wys Engeland vir my – Engeland nie Australië nie!” Sy hou nie op totdat Hildemara elke land sonder ’n oomblik se huiwering kan aandui nie.

Toe Clotilde kla oor hoeveel skoolwerk sy moet doen, brom Hildemara. “Ek kan nie wag om weer skool toe te gaan nie! Dit sal ’n vakansie wees teen Mamma se klasse.”

Mamma hou ’n streng oog oor Hildemara. Sy besluit wat sy eet, hoeveel sy slaap en wat sy leer. Sy kla net een maal, en sy loop deur. “Ek gee nie om dat Europese geskiedenis nie deel van jou opdragte is nie. Ek gee nie om dat dit nie in jou handboek is nie. Jy moet weet wat in die wêreld aangaan. As ons nie weet wat in die geskiedenis gebeur het nie, is ons gedoem om dit te herhaal.”

Dokter Whiting sê Hildemara kan weer skool toe gaan. Mamma besluit om haar nog ’n maand by die huis te hou. “Sy moet eers twee kilogram optel, anders kry sy die volgende kiem wat kop uitsteek.”

Mamma stuur Hildemara betyds skool toe om eksamen te gaan skryf. Toe die punte terugkom, staan Hildemara eerste in haar klas. Mamma wens haar geluk. “Nou weet ons albei jy is slim genoeg om enigiets te doen.”

* * *

’n Paar weke voor die skool sluit, is daar ’n brief van Hedda Herkner.

“Goeie nuus? Slegte nuus?” Pappa lig sy wenkbroue.

“Dit hang af.” Mamma vou die brief op. “Lyk my Fritz het so baie oor sy somer by ons gepraat dat sommige van sy vriende saam met hom wil kom.”

“Kom hy terug?”

“Het ek jou nie gesê nie? In elk geval, Hedda sê die ouers dink dit sal hulle seuns goed doen om iets van die plaaslewe te leer. Daardie stadsjapies het nie die vaagste benul nie. Wat dink jy, Niclas?”

“Nóú vra jy my?”

“Nog seuns!” kreun Clotilde.

Pappa sug. “Hoeveel?”

“Ses as ’n mens Bernhard en Fritz ook tel.”

“Ses? Dink jy jy sal hulle almal op een slag kan hanteer?”

“Ek sal dit nie alleen doen nie. Hildemara kan help.”

Hildemara sluit haar oë en haal stadig asem.

Mamma laat sak die brief asof sy haar handskoene uitgetrek het en enigiemand uitdaag wat teen haar wil standpunt inneem. “’n Mens kan goeie geld maak uit so ’n somerkamp. En dis die naaste aan my eie restaurant en hotel wat ek ooit sal kom. Die ouers wil hê hulle seuns moet van die plaaslewe leer. En dis presies wat ons gaan doen.”

“Wonderlik,” brom Bernie. “Klink na pret.”

Hildemara kan haar ma sien dink en dan verwoord sy haar gedagtes. “Niemand gaan meer as ’n halwe dag werk nie. Met ses seuns sal Pappa die leivore in ’n ommesientjie gegrawe hê. Hulle kan die druiwe en amandels help oes. Hulle sal leer hoe om perde, hoenders en hase te versorg, hoe om ’n koei te melk … ” Sy trommel met haar vingers op die tafel. Hildemara wonder met watter deel sy sal moet help. “En dit sal dalk ’n goeie idee wees om hulle iets te laat bou.”

Pappa laat sak sy koerant. “Wat te laat bou?”

“Wat van ’n badkamer by die huis aanbou? Bernhard se kamer is so groot dat twee meter nie gemis sal word nie.

Bernie se kop ruk op. “Mamma!”

“Jy sal die hele somer saam met die seuns in die boomhuis slaap om seker te maak dat hulle nie moeilikheid aanjaag of iets oorkom nie.”

“’n Binnenshuise badkamer?” Clotilde glimlag breed, dromerig. “Met ’n regte toilet? Dan hoef ons nie meer kleinhuisie toe te gaan nie.”

“’n Toilet, ’n kloupootbad en ’n wasbak, dink ek.” Dit lyk nie asof

Pappa se stormagtige uitdrukking Mamma enigsins van stryk bring nie. “Dis hoog tyd. Almal in Murietta het ’n binnenshuise badkamer.”

“Here, wees my genadig,” sê Pappa binnensmonds en lig weer sy koerant.

“Niclas?”

“Ja, Marta?”

“Ja of nee?”

“Jy is in beheer van die geld.”

“En ’n telefoon, daar teen die muur.”

“’n Telefoon!” Clotilde straal.

“Slegs vir noodgevalle.” Mamma gee haar ’n kyk.

Pappa skud sy kop en blaai om. “Klink na chaos.”

***

Junie breek aan, en saam met die stof kom Jimmy, Ralph, Gordon, Billie en Fritz ingedwarrel. Fritz het die afgelope jaar 15 sentimeter gegroei en hy is hoogs in sy noppies oor die feit dat hy bo-oor Hildemara uittroon wat skaars 5 sentimeter gegroei het. Clotilde kan hom egter in die oë kyk. Fritz weet genoeg om net een klein tassie saam met hom te bring. Die ander seuns arriveer met bagasie wat agter uit gesinsmotors gelaai word. “Ryk mense,” fluister Clotilde vir Hildemara.

Hildemara sug. Die seunsagtige opgewondenheid voorspel werk. “Dit gaan nie so maklik wees soos wat Mamma dink nie.”

Mamma nooi die ouers na die woonkamer terwyl Pappa, Bernie en Fritz die nuwe seuns op ’n toer van die plaas neem. Hildie bedien tee, koffie en silwersuikerbrood en Mamma verduidelik die take, projekte en ontspanningsaktiwiteite wat vir die seuns se “somerkamp” beplan is.

Een ma lyk onseker. “Dit klink of julle van hulle verwag om baie werk te doen.”

“Ja, jy is reg. En as julle instem, is daar ’n kontrak wat julle kan teken. Die seuns sal nie kan jakkalsdraaie gooi as hulle weet dat julle my steun nie. Om te boer is baie harde werk. Julle seuns gaan leer om die mense te respekteer wat hulle produkte op die markte verkoop. En teen die einde van die somer gaan hulle almal dokters en advokate wil wees.”

Die ouers teken met ’n glimlag, soen hulle seuns totsiens vir die

somer, sê hulle sal einde Augustus terug wees, en vertrek.

Niemand huil nie.

Nie op die eerste dag nie.

Mamma laat die seuns hulle bagasie na die boomhuis toe neem. “Pak julle klere onder die bankie en gaan bêre julle tasse in die skuur.” Sy laat hulle die hele middag speel. Hildemara luister na hulle gelag en gejil en sy wonder hoe gou daardie geluide in ’n ontevrede gekla en gekerm gaan ontaard. Toe Mamma die etensklok lui, word daar eers opgewas en dan hardloop hulle huis toe om hulle plekke aan tafel in te neem. Mamma sit ’n fees voor van bief Wellington en gestoomde tuingroente in botter. Sy belowe dat daar sjokoladekoek vir nagereg is.

“Sjoe!” fluister Ralph vir Fritz. “Jy het gesê sy is ’n goeie kok. Jy was reg!”

Terwyl almal eet, verduidelik Mamma al die reëls en word die daaglikse take en aktiwiteite uiteengesit. “Die program is op die agterdeur geplak vir ingeval julle vergeet.” Hildemara weet hulle sal. Nie een van die seuns luister juis nie. Fritz kyk met ’n skelm grinnik na Bernie.

Dit is nog donker toe Mamma Hildemara die volgende oggend wakker maak. Sy staan gelate op, trek aan en gaan uit om die hoenders kos te gee en genoeg eiers uit te haal om hulle klein weermag te voer. Pappa eet vroeg en gaan uit “voordat die pandemonium losbars”. Mamma lui die driehoek op die kop sesuur.

Die seuns roer, maar niemand staan op nie. Mamma gaan uit en nadat sy ses grawe teen die boom staangemaak het, roep sy op na die seuns. “Julle kan maar afkom. Julle het werk om te doen.” Bernie en Fritz is die enigstes wat reageer.

Om agtuur lui Mamma die ontbytklok. Bernie en Fritz kom aangehardloop. Die nuwe seuns klim haastig by die touleer af en hardloop na die huis toe. Toe hulle by die agterdeur kom, ontdek hulle dat dit gesluit is. Jimmy ruk twee maal daaraan. “Ek dink dis gesluit.” Hulle hardloop om die huis en tref die voordeur ook gesluit aan. Hulle staan op die stoep en loer deur die venster na Bernie en Fritz wat roereiers, gebraaide spek en bloubessie muffins geniet.

“Haai!” roep Ralph deur die venster. “Wat van ons ontbyt?”

Mamma skink warm sjokolade in Fritz se beker. “Gaan lees die bordjie bokant die agterdeur, seuns.”

Hulle voete kletter by die stoeptrappies af. Hildemara kyk deur die venster hoe hulle koppe op en af wip soos hulle aan die kant van die

huis verbyhardloop. Sy weet wat daar op hulle wag. *Hulle wat nie werk nie, sal nie eet nie.*

Die rebellie breek onmiddellik uit.

“My pa-hulle het betaal sodat ek kan vakansie hou! Nie werk nie!”

“Ek gaan vir my ouers skryf dat sy ons dwing om te werk!”

“Sy kan dit nie doen nie.”

Alhoewel Hildemara aanvanklik wegkrimp, steur Mamma haar nie daaraan nie. “Hulle sal leer.”

Dit is ’n versadige en smalende Bernie en Fritz wat by die agterdeur uitgaan. Hildemara gaan kamer toe om te rus voordat Mamma se volgende werkskof begin. Die seuns argumenteer buite voor die gaasvensters. “Kerm julle ouens nog steeds?” Bernie vryf oor sy maag. “Julle het ’n goeie ontbyt gemis.”

“Ons het nie hiernatoe gekom om te werk nie!”

“Moet dan nie. Ly honger. Dis julle keuse.”

“Ek gaan my ma bel.” Gordon se stem bewe. Sy trane is nie meer ver nie.

“Gaan bel haar, maar jy sal dorp toe moet loop vir ’n telefoon. Die een in die huis is net vir noodgevalle.”

“Watse soort plek is dit hierdie?” gil Ralph ontstoke. “Ons is nie slawe nie.”

Bernie lag. “Julle ouers het julle aan Mamma oorgeteken. Sy besit julle vir die hele somer. Julle beter daaraan gewoond raak, ouens.”

“Haai!” Jimmy stamp aan Fritz. “Jy het gesê ons gaan dit geniet!”

“Ek het gesê ék het dit geniet.” Fritz stamp harder terug. “Moenie ’n baba wees nie! Ons werk net ’n paar uur ’n dag en dan kan ons doen wat ons wil.”

Bernie kan dit nie weerstaan nie. “Solank ons net nie huise of skure afbrand nie.”

Hildemara sit regop en kyk deur die gaas. “Bernie!”

“Oukei! Oukei!”

“Jy het niks van werk gesê nie, Fritz! Ek hoef nie by die huis te werk nie. Hoekom moet ek dit hier doen?”

Hildemara val op haar bed neer en sluit haar oë en wens hulle wil ophou twis. Aan die ander kant van die muur is Cloe in die woonkamer op die naaimasjien besig. Rikka se konsentrasievermoë is van so ’n aard dat sy nie die chaos voor die venster hoor terwyl sy deur ’n biblioteekboek oor Rembrandt blaai nie.

Bernie is steeds besig om die stadsjapies genadeloos te terg. “Julle beter saam met ons kom as julle middagete wil hê.”

"Ek's nie 'n slootgrawer nie!" gil Ralph agter hom aan.

"Jy sal wees!" roep Fritz terug.

"Hildemara!" roep Mamma. "Daar is 'n mandjie wasgoed. Neem dit waskamer toe en begin solank." Hildemara balanseer die mandjie op haar heup en maak die gaasdeur oop. Jimmy, Ralph, Gordon en Billie dwaal soos verlore siele op soek na iets om te doen.

Net voor Mamma die etensklok lui, kom Bernie en Fritz uit die boord te voorskyn. Hulle gaan by die agterdeur in en sluit die gaasdeur voordat die ander kan inkom. "Lees die bordjie, ouens!" Bernie en Fritz lag en gaan in die huis in terwyl die ander buitekant rondstaan, hulle opstand nou vinnig besig om in die somerhitte te verwelk.

Ná ete laat spaander Bernie en Fritz na die groot leivoor agter op die plaas. "Kom, julle!" Die ander hardloop nie so vinnig nie, maar vergeet lank genoeg van hulle honger om die middag te geniet. Hildemara kan hulle hoor skree en lag en speel terwyl sy die groentetuin skoonmaak. Sy weet hoe haar somer gaan verloop, en daar gaan nie veel speeltyd wees nie. Toe Mamma die etensklok lui, kom die seuns aangehardloop. Bernie en Fritz duik onder Mamma se arm deur voordat sy die deur toemaak en sluit. Jimmy, Ralph, Gordon en Billie bly oopmond staan.

"Ons gaan doodgaan van die honger." Jimmy vee vinnig sy trane weg.

"Ek het die reëls gisteraand aan julle verduidelik, seuns. Ek hou nie daarvan om alles wat ek sê te herhaal nie. Ons kan môre skoon begin. Dit hang van julle af." Mamma draai haar rug op hulle en gaan by die huis in.

Fritz skud sy kop toe hy sy plek aan tafel inneem. "Ek het nog nooit so 'n gekerm en gekla gehoor nie."

Hildemara gluur hom aan. "Toemaar, verlede somer was dit jy." Sy voel jammer vir die verhongerende massa voor die agterdeur.

Pappa lyk stug. "Daardie seuns gaan wegloop."

"Laat hulle loop." Mamma hou 'n bak aartappelkluitjies na Fritz toe uit. "Hulle gaan bitter gou besef dat hulle nêrens het om heen te gaan nie."

Hildemara bekommer haar nietemin. "Sê nou hulle wil nie môre werk nie, Mamma?" Gaan Mamma dan vir háár 'n graaf in die hand stop? Gaan sy alleen na die hoenders en hase en perde moet omsien?

"Dan eet hulle nie."

Die volgende oggend sesuur gaan Mamma uit en lui die klok reg

onder die boom. “Wat sê julle, ouens? Is julle gereed om julle deel van die werk te doen? Vir dié wat is, wag daar wafels met botter en warm esdoringstroop, spek en warm sjokolade. Vir dié wat nie wil werk nie, is daar water in die tuinslang.”

Al ses seuns kom met die touleer af en vat elkeen ’n graaf.

’n Uur later skink Hildemara kakao en kyk hoe die nuwe seuns soos uitgehongerde wolwe aan hulle kos wegval. Mamma hou ’n bord wafels in die een hand en ’n vurk in die ander. “Enigiemand lus vir ’n tweede porsie?” Vier hande skiet op. “Wanneer julle klaar geëet het, moet julle met julle grawe na die boord toe gaan. Pappa wag daar vir julle en sal julle sê wat om volgende te doen.”

Toe Pappa inkom vir middagete, glimlag hy vir Mamma. “Lyk my jy het hulle ingebreek.” Al ses kom in, was hulle hande by die kombuiswasbak en kom sit aan tafel.

Mamma hou twee borde met ham-en-kaas-toebroodjies uit. “Wys my julle hande, seuns.” Hulle hou hulle uit. “Blase! Mooi so! Julle sal voor die einde van die somer met julle eelte kan spog. Niemand sal julle ooit sissies noem nie.” Sy pak die borde op die tafel uit en teen die tyd dat Hildemara ’n bak druiwe en appels neersit, is die borde leeg. Mamma gaan sit aan die onderpunt van die tafel. “Wanneer julle klaar is, het julle die res van die dag vry.”

Hildemara weet dat sy nie so gelukkig gaan wees nie. Sy gaan terug kombuis toe en maak ’n halwe toebroodjie vir haarself.

## Chapter 26

**1930**

Summers meant even more work for Hildemara. She helped Mama cook, kept the house swept clean of the dust and sand always blowing in, washed clothes. In the afternoon, while Clotilde looked at movie star magazines and dreamed up new clothing designs and Rikka sat on the porch swing daydreaming and drawing, Hildemara weeded the vegetable and flower gardens. Hildemara didn't understand why Mama expected so much from her and so little from her sisters.

Clotilde repaired shirts and pants and sleeping bags. Cloe loved to sew and she was good at it. Mama bought material for shirts for Papa and Bernie and dresses for Hildemara, Clotilde, and Rikka, two new ones each year. When Cloe finished, Mama gave her money to buy fabric remnants to piece together and make whatever she wanted. Cloe could sketch garments, make patterns from butcher paper, and sew a dress that didn't look like one everyone else was wearing that year.

Rikki wandered around in a dreamy state, always seeking a place to sit and draw whatever attracted her undivided attention. If she didn't come in for dinner, Mama sent Hildemara out looking for her. Mama never asked Rikka to do chores. "She has other things to do." Like draw birds or butterflies or the Musashi girls working in the rows of tomatoes.

Sometimes Hildemara resented it. Especially on a hot day when she could feel the dust blow against her damp skin and feel the trickle of sweat between her growing breasts. Hildemara worked on her hands and knees, pulling weeds from the flower garden around the front of the house. Rikka lay on the porch swing, hands behind her head, gazing off at the clouds. Hildemara sat back on her heels, wiping perspiration from her forehead. "Would you like to help me, Rikki?"

"Have you ever looked at the clouds, Hildie?" She pointed. "Children playing. A bird in flight. A kite."

"I don't have time to look at clouds."

Mama came out and asked Rikki if she'd like a glass of lemonade. Hildemara sat back on her heels again. "Can't Rikki take a turn weeding once in a while, Mama?"

"She knows who she is and what she wants out of life. Besides, she has such fair skin, she'd burn to a crisp pulling weeds in the

garden. You do the weeding. You haven't got anything better to do. Have you?"

"No, Mama."

"Then I guess you'd better get used to doing what you're told." She went back into the house.

Rikka came to the porch railing and sat against a post. She had a sketchbook in her hand and started drawing. "You could say no, Hildemara."

"It has to get done, Rikki."

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Hildie?"

Hildemara yanked another weed and threw it into the bucket. "A nurse."

"What?"

"Never mind. What's the use of dreaming?"

She picked up the weed bucket and moved to a row of carrots. "There will never be enough money for me to go to training."

"You could ask."

*And have Mama say no?* "The money Papa and Mama make off the farm and Summer Bedlam has to go to mortgage payments and taxes and farm equipment and vet bills for the horse."

"They're doing well, aren't they? Papa just extended the shelter he built off the barn."

"That's so winter rains won't rust his tractor."

Rikki wandered along the row of vegetables. "Mama buys sewing supplies for Clotilde."

Hildemara bent over and pulled another weed.

Rikki put her arms out like a bird, dipping one way and then the other. "Mama buys me art supplies."

Hildemara threw weeds into the bucket. "I know."

Rikki turned. "Because we ask."

Hildemara sighed. "Tuition to a nursing school and textbooks cost more than sewing and art supplies, Rikki."

"If you don't ask, you'll never get anything."

"Maybe God has another plan."

"Oh, I already know what it is."

"What?"

"Go on being a martyr."

Stung, Hildemara sat back on her heels, her mouth opening and closing as Rikki skipped up the back steps and went into the house.

* * *

Mama continued pressing her about the future, though Hildemara didn't see that she had one. "You're about to enter high school. You need to start making plans."

"Plans for what?"

"College. A career."

"Bernie's going to college. I heard you talking to Papa about how much that will cost."

"He might get a scholarship."

*Might* didn't mean *would*. "I hope he does." She wondered how one went about getting a scholarship and whether she might qualify.

"Well?" Mama looked annoyed. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"What do you want me to say, Mama?"

"What you have on your mind."

Hildemara chewed the inside of her lip, but lost her nerve. "Nothing."

Shaking her head, Mama took her purse and headed out the back door. "I have shopping to do in town. Do you need anything, Clotilde?" Red thread. "Rikka?" A box of pencils. She gave Hildemara an annoyed look. "I don't have to ask you. You never want a thing, do you?"

*Nothing as inexpensive as red thread and a box of pencils,* she wanted to say, but then Mama might ask the question of what she did want, and she'd have to hear why she couldn't have it.

Hildemara went to the library the next day and checked out a biography of Florence Nightingale. She read on the long walk home, taking her time, knowing she'd have chores to fill the rest of her afternoon and evening. She came in through the back screen door and shoved the book under her mattress before going in to help Mama with dinner. She set the table and made the salad, then later, cleared the table and heated water to wash the dishes. Cloe got out her folder of glossy pictures from movie magazines and studied dress designs, while Rikki sketched Papa reading in his chair. Mama set her box of writing materials on the table.

Letters, letter, letters. Mama was always writing to someone. Sometimes Hildemara wondered if her mother loved all those people in other parts of the world more than she loved her own family.

Papa went to bed early. Mama followed him. "Don't stay up late, girls."

When Cloe and Rikka finished their game, Hildemara took the

book out from under her mattress. "I'll come to bed in a few minutes."

* * *

Mama stood at the work counter rolling out a piecrust when Hildemara came in the front door. The biography she had hidden lay on the kitchen table. Heat rushed into Hildemara's cheeks when Mama glanced over her shoulder. "I saw your mattress sticking up and felt a book. I expected to find Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*. That's what I thought you'd be reading."

"It's a biography, Mama. Florence Nightingale was a nurse."

"I know what it is! I know who she was."

Hildemara picked up the book and headed for the back door.

"Put that book back on the table, Hildemara."

"It belongs to the library, Mama. I have to return it."

"It's not due until the end of the week, unless you've already finished it." Mama laid the crust over a pie dish. "Have you?" She pressed it down and poured in a bowl of pitted cherries.

"Yes, Mama." Hildie stood watching Mama roll out the top crust. It took only seconds for her to lay it over the cherries, cut away the extra crust, pinch around the edges, and poke holes in the top. Mama opened the oven, slid the pie in, and banged the door shut.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to make a pie as good or as fast as you, Mama."

"Probably not." Flipping the towel over her shoulder, Mama stood, hands on her hips. "But then that's not what you want to do, is it?"

Hildemara hung her head.

"Is it?" Mama raised her voice.

"No, Mama."

"How many times have you read that book?" Mama jutted her chin toward the offending biography. "Two times, three?"

Hildemara thought it best not to answer. She felt exposed enough without having her heart laid bare.

"It's not Florence Nightingale that fascinates you, is it? It's *nursing*. I'll bet you've been dreaming about it since Mrs. King came here with all her stories. Let me tell you something, Hildemara Rose. She filled your head with a lot of romantic nonsense. I'll tell you what nursing really is. A nurse isn't any better than a servant. I've spent most of my life scrubbing floors, cleaning kitchens, and washing clothes. I'd like to see you do something more with that brain of yours than spend the rest of your life emptying bedpans and changing

sheets! If you want to know my opinion, I don't see nursing as coming up in the world from where I started out!"

Hildemara felt hurt and angry at the same time. "There's more to nursing than bedpans and sheets, Mama. It's an honorable profession. I would be helping people."

"That's what you do best, isn't it? *Help* people. *Serve* people. You're already good at being a servant. God knows, you've been mine for the last six years. No matter how hard I've pushed, you never once complained." She sounded angry about it.

"You and Papa work so hard. Why would I complain about doing my share?"

"Your share! You've done more than your share."

"You needed help, Mama."

"I don't need your help."

She blinked back tears, knowing that crying would annoy Mama even more. "I never please you, no matter what I do. I don't know why I try so hard."

"I don't either! What do you want? A badge for being a martyr?"

"No, but a little approval from you would be nice."

Mama's eyes flickered. Sighing, she pushed her hands into her apron pockets. "Life isn't about pleasing other people, Hildemara. It's about deciding who you are and what you want out of life and then going after it."

How could she make Mama understand? "For me, it's about doing what God wants, Mama. It's about loving one another. It's about serving."

Mama blinked. "That's the first straightforward thing you've ever said to me, Hildemara Rose." Her mouth curved in a sad smile. "A pity we can't agree."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

Her eyes flashed. "There you go again, apologizing. You'd better learn right now not to say you're sorry for being who you are."

She picked up a dishrag, wiped the counter, and tossed it into the sink. "If you want to go to nurses' training, you had better find work and start saving your money because I'm not paying for it."

Somehow the rejection didn't hurt as much as Hildemara had expected it would. "I didn't ask."

"No, you didn't. But then, you wouldn't, would you? You wouldn't believe you had any right to expect anything." She slid the book across the table. "Take it!"

Hildie picked up the book and looked at it for a long moment. When she looked up, she saw Mama staring at her strangely.

"One thing good has come out of this conversation, Hildemara Rose. At least I know now you won't be clinging to my apron strings or living under my roof for the rest of your life. You won't end up running away or sitting out in the cold until you freeze. You're on the edge of the nest right now, my girl. You'll fly out of here soon." She smiled, eyes gleaming. "And that pleases me. That pleases me very, very much!"

Hildemara climbed onto her bunk, hugged the book against her chest, and cried. Whatever she had thought before, Hildemara saw now Mama couldn't wait to get rid of her.

* * *

Hildemara lost her pal Elizabeth to Bernie the first day of high school. She'd always suspected Elizabeth had a secret crush on Bernie, but Bernie had never shown interest in Elizabeth. He'd been too caught up in playing sports and making mischief with his friends to care much about girls. On the first day of freshman year, Hildie sat on the grass with Elizabeth, talking about the second session of Summer Bedlam, as Papa called it, and her dreams of going to nursing school. Bernie stood over them with an odd look on his face.

"Hey, Bernie." Hildemara shielded the sun from her eyes. "What're you doing in the freshmen area?"

"Why don't you introduce me to your friend, Hildie?"

She thought he must be kidding, but played along. "Elizabeth Kenney, this is my older brother, Bernhard Niclas Waltert. Bernie, this is Elizabeth. Now, what do you want? We're talking and you're interrupting."

Bernie hunkered down, eyes fixed on Elizabeth. "You sure changed over the summer."

Elizabeth's cheeks turned dark pink. She ducked her head and looked up at him through her lashes. "In a good way, I hope."

He grinned. "Oh yeah."

Annoyed, Hildemara glared at him. "Don't you have somewhere else to go, Bernie? I can see Eddie and Wallie over there, playing basketball."

He sat and leaned on his elbow. "Don't you have studying to do, Hildie? or someplace else to go?" He didn't look at her as he talked, and Elizabeth didn't look away from him either. Bernie might as well have said, "Get lost!"

"We were talking, Bernie."

His mouth tipped, his gaze never leaving Elizabeth's face. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"No." Elizabeth sounded breathless. "Of course not."

Hildemara rolled her eyes. She looked between her brother and best friend and knew everything had changed in a split second. When she got up, neither noticed. When she walked away, neither called her back. When school let out, she saw Bernie walking beside Elizabeth, her book bag slung over his shoulder. When she called out to them, neither heard her.

Bernie had the entire school following on his heels. Why did he have to set his sights on Elizabeth? "Thanks," she muttered under her breath. "Thanks for taking my one and only friend."

She met Cloe and Rikki on the other side of the highway, near the grade school. "You two go on ahead. I have something to do." Mama said she'd have to earn her own money for nursing school, and what better time to start than now? As soon as her sisters headed off for home, Hildemara rubbed her perspiring palms against her skirt and went into Pitt's Drug Store. It took her a few minutes of browsing around before she could gather the courage to ask Mrs. Pitt if she might hire someone to work behind the counter, serving root beer floats and milk shakes.

Mrs. Pitt was drying a glass. "Did you have someone in mind?"

Hildie gulped. "Me."

Mrs. Pitt laughed. "You can start tomorrow. I've got plenty of other things I'd rather do around here than serve teenagers root beer floats and milk shakes." She called out loudly. "You hear that, Howard? Hildemara Waltert is coming to work for us tomorrow." She winked at Hildemara. "I'll show you what's what. It's pretty simple. Having you work here might draw some more teenagers."

Hildemara didn't want to tell her not to get her hopes up.

On the long walk home, Hildie felt flushed with success. She relished her secret as she raced through her chores.

Hildie set the table and sat down to dinner, eager to make her announcement, but everyone else had plenty to say. Bernie said he was late because he'd walked Elizabeth Kenney home and her mother invited him in for cookies and milk. Clotilde asked Mama if she could have a dollar to buy some fabric. Rikka stared off into space, undoubtedly thinking about some new drawing she wanted to do, until Mama told her to get busy and eat.

Dinner was almost over before there was enough lull in the conversation for Hildie to make her announcement. "I have a job."

Papa's head came up. "A job?"

"I start work tomorrow after school at the soda fountain inside Pitt's Drug Store."

Mama smiled slightly. "Is that so?"

Papa wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I don't like the idea. You have your studies, and what about Mama? She needs your help around the house."

"I do not." Mama tossed her napkin on the table. "And if I did, I have two other daughters who can pitch in."

Clotilde squinted a look at Hildemara. "Thanks." Rikka went on eating, her mind still off in the wild blue yonder.

Papa frowned at Mama. "Did you know about this?"

She stood up and started clearing dishes. "It had to happen sooner or later, didn't it? Children don't live off their parents forever. Or shouldn't."

"How come I'm going to have to work and Bernie doesn't?" Clotilde griped.

Bernie put his fork down. "We can trade anytime you want. I'll feed the chickens and set the table. You can help Papa with the plowing and planting and harvesting."

"I work! I made that shirt you're wearing!"

Papa slammed his fist on the table. "Enough!" Mama's mouth twitched into a smile that smoothed out when Papa looked down the table at her. "Did you know Hildemara was looking for a job?"

"I told her she'd better."

"Why?"

"Ask her. She can speak for herself." She gave Hildie a cool look, brows raised in challenge. "Can't you?" It didn't sound like a question.

Papa stared at Hildemara. "Well?"

She took a deep breath, hoping to slow her racing heart, and laid out her plans for the future. When she finished, everyone sat staring at her.

Papa broke the silence. "Oh. Well. Why didn't you say so?"

"Since you're not working yet, you can help clear the table, Hildemara." Mama didn't say anything else until she handed her the last dish to dry. "When do you plan to study? You'll have to keep your grades up."

"Between classes. During lunch break. I'll only work until six."

“You’ll have to warm up your dinner when you get home.”

“I’ll manage.” She had hoped Mama might say she’d miss having her around the house. She should have known better.

“It might be good to start a savings account at the bank, just so you don’t squander your earnings.”

“I planned to do that with my first paycheck.”

“Good.” Mama left Hildemara to finish the cleanup and went outside to sit on the porch swing.

* * *

Papa said the Depression wouldn’t last forever, but hard times brought more traveling salesmen to the door. Farmers fared better than most. They knew how to grow their own food. Even with the price of almonds and raisins down, Papa and Mama didn’t worry about putting food on the table. Papa had enough money for the mortgage and taxes. “If we run short, I can find work,” Mama told him. “Mr. Smith offered me a job at his bakery.”

“You aren’t going to work for him, are you?”

“He swears he had nothing to do with the Herkners’ bakery burning down.”

“And you believe him.”

“You’re the one who always tells me not to judge people, Niclas.”

“There’s judging, and there’s discerning.”

Mama sighed. “I said no, but if we need money, I know where to get work.”

“Start baking more here. Take your *beignets* and *Torten* to Hardesty. He’d sell them for you.”

Mama chuckled. “If you want *beignets* and *Torten* or anything else, Niclas, just say so.”

*“So.”* He pulled her down on his lap and whispered in her ear.

* * *

When others went to the movies, Hildemara worked. She met more students while working behind the soda fountain counter than she had during eight and a half years of school in Murietta. When the movies let out, the kids came across the street for sodas and sat in booths talking. Some of the adults left her five-cent tips.

She liked working. She liked the bustle and buzz of teenagers in and out of the drug store. She liked earning money, knowing every day she worked brought her closer to her goal. She took orders, made milk shakes and floats, washed glasses, cleaned counters, all the while dreaming of the day she would wear a white uniform and cap and

walk the corridors of a hospital, bringing comfort to the sick. Maybe someday, she'd go to China and serve in a mission hospital, or tend sick babies in the Belgian Congo, or help a handsome, dedicated doctor stop an epidemic in India.

Mrs. King came in with a list from Dr. Whiting. While she waited for Mr. Pitt to fill the drug order, she sat at the counter and ordered a Coca-Cola. Hildemara told her she hoped to attend the nurses' training program at Merritt Hospital in Oakland. "That's wonderful, Hildemara! When you're closer to graduation, I'll write a letter of recommendation for you."

The first year of high school passed in a blur of study and work. When Summer Bedlam rolled around again, Hildie asked Mama if she could do without her. Of course Mama said yes. Hildemara took on a second job at the Fulsomes' chicken farm, plucking birds for market. Paid by the bird, Hildie learned to work fast.

She hoarded every dime and nickel, knowing exactly how much she had to save in order to pay for tuition and uniform fees. She would also need the tools of her trade: a pocket watch with a second hand to count heartbeats and a fountain pen to write vitals on patient charts. Mama and Papa had already made plans to send Bernie to college when he graduated at the end of the next school year. Every extra dollar would go toward getting him through school.

Hildie had seen Papa hand Bernie a dollar more than once so her brother could take Elizabeth to a movie on Friday night. "He's young. He needs to have a little fun."

Mama saw, too, and protested. "And what about the girls? They're young. They want to have fun. Are you going to hand them a dollar every time they ask?"

Hildemara covered her ears with the heels of her hands. She hated to hear her parents argue over money. She swore she would never ask them for a dime. She would earn her own way.

# Hoofstuk 26

## 1930

Somers beteken net nog meer werk vir Hildemara. Sy help Mamma kos maak en moet die stof en sand uitvee wat gedurig inwaai, en sy moet klere was. Smiddae wanneer Clotilde deur filmster-tydskrifte blaai en van nuwe ontwerpe droom en Rikka op die stoepswaai sit en teken, moet Hildemara die groente- en blomtuine skoonmaak. Hildemara verstaan nie waarom Mamma soveel van haar verwag en so min van haar susters nie.

Clotilde doen al die herstelwerk aan hemde en broeke en slaapsakke. Cloe hou daarvan om naaldwerk te doen en sy is goed daarmee. Mamma koop materiaal vir hemde vir Pappa en Bernie en rokke vir Hildemara en Clotilde en Rikka, twee nuwes elke jaar. Wanneer Cloe klaar is, gee Mamma vir haar geld om oorskietmateriaal te koop waarmee sy kan maak wat sy wil. Cloe teken prentjies van kledingstukke, sny patrone uit deurslagpapier en maak rokke wat anders lyk as dié wat almal daardie jaar dra.

Rikka dwaal bedags droomverlore rond op soek na ’n plek om te sit en enigiets te teken wat haar onverdeelde aandag trek. As sy nie inkom vir ete nie, stuur Mamma Hildemara om haar te gaan soek. Mamma vra Rikka nooit om takies te doen nie. “Sy het ander dinge om te doen.” Soos om voëls of skoenlappers te teken, of die Musashi-dogters waar hulle tussen die rye tamaties werk.

Somtyds het Hildemara ’n weersin daarin. Veral op ’n warm dag wanneer die stof teen haar klam vel aanpak en die sweet in ’n straaltjie tussen haar ontwikkelende borste afloop. Hildemara trek onkruid uit die blomtuin terwyl Rikka op die stoepswaai na die wolke lê en tuur, hande agter haar kop gekruis. Hildemara sit op haar hakke en vee die sweet van haar voorkop af. “Wil jy my nie help nie, Rikki?”

“Het jy al ooit na die wolke gekyk, Hildie?” Sy wys. “Kinders wat speel. ’n Voël wat vlieg. ’n Vlieër.”

"Ek het nie tyd om na die wolke te kyk nie."

Mamma kom uit en vra vir Rikka of sy 'n glas limonade wil hê. Hildemara sit weer orent. "Kan Rikki nie af en toe 'n beurt kry om onkruid uit te trek nie, Mamma?"

"Sy weet wie sy is en wat sy uit die lewe wil hê. Sy het in elk geval so 'n ligte vel dat sy haar gaar sal brand as sy in die tuin moet werk. Trek jy die onkruid uit. Jy het in elk geval niks beters om te doen nie, of hoe?"

"Nee, Mamma."

"Dan moet jy maar daarmee vrede maak om te doen wat ander mense sê." Daarmee verdwyn sy in die huis.

Rikka staan op en kom sit teen een van die stoepreling se pale. Sy het 'n sketsboek by haar en begin teken. "Jy kan nee sê, Hildemara."

"Iemand moet dit doen, Rikki."

"Wat wil jy wees as jy groot is, Hildie?"

Hildemara pluk nog 'n onkruid uit en gooi dit in die emmer. "'n Verpleegster."

"Wat?"

"Toemaar wat. Dit help tog nie om te droom nie."

Sy tel die onkruidemmer op en gaan kniel by 'n ry wortels. "Daar sal nooit genoeg geld vir opleiding wees nie."

"Jy kan vra."

*En Mamma hoor nee sê?* "Die geld wat Pappa en Mamma uit die plaas en somerkampe maak, word gebruik vir die verband op die plaas en belasting en implemente en veeartsrekeninge."

"Maar hulle doen nie sleg nie. Pappa het so pas die afdak verleng wat hy by die skuur aangebou het."

"Dis sodat die winterreëen nie sy trekker sal laat roes nie."

Rikka dwaal langs die ry groente af. "Mamma koop naaldwerkvoorraad vir Clotilde."

Hildemara buk en trek nog 'n onkruid uit.

Rikka sprei haar arms soos 'n voëltjie en kantel heen en weer. "Mamma koop al my kunsgoed."

Hildemara gooi die onkruid in die emmer. "Ek weet."

Rikka draai om. "Want ons vra."

Hildemara sug. "Opleiding by 'n verpleegkollege en handboeke kos meer as naaldwerk- en kunsvoorraad, Rikki."

"As jy nie vra nie, gaan jy nooit kry nie."

"Dalk het die Here 'n ander plan vir my."

"Ek weet tog klaar wat dit is."

“Wat?”

“Om vir die res van jou lewe ’n martelaar te wees.”

Hildemara kom seergemaak regop en haar mond gaan oop en toe terwyl Rikka die trappies opdraf en by die huis ingaan.

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Mamma bly haar oor haar toekoms pols, maar Hildemara kan nie sien dat sy een het nie. “Jy gaan amper hoërskool toe. Jy moet begin planne maak.”

“Planne vir wat?”

“Kollege. ’n Loopbaan.”

“Bernie gaan kollege toe. Ek het Mamma vir Pappa hoor sê hoeveel dit gaan kos.”

“Hy kan dalk ’n beurs kry.”

*Kan* beteken nie *sal* nie. “Ek hoop hy kry dit.” Sy wonder wat ’n mens moet doen om ’n beurs te kry en of sy dalk sal kwalifiseer.

“Nou ja?” Mamma lyk geïrriteerd. “Gaan jy niks sê nie?”

“Wat wil Mamma hê ek moet sê?”

“Wat jy op die hart het.”

Hildemara kou aan die binnekant van haar lip, maar sy het nie die moed nie. “Niks nie.”

Mamma skud haar kop toe sy haar beursie optel en na die agterdeur toe loop. “Ek moet dorp toe gaan. Het jy enigiets nodig, Clotilde?” Rooi garing. “Rikka?” ’n Blikkie potlode. Sy gee Hildemara ’n ergerlike kyk. “Ek hoef nie te vra nie. Jy wil mos nooit iets hê nie.”

*Niks so goedkoop soos rooi gare en ’n blikkie potlode nie*, wil sy sê, maar dan sal Mamma wil hoor wat dit is en sal sy moet hoor waarom sy dit nie kan hê nie.

Hildemara gaan die volgende dag biblioteek toe om die biografie van Florence Nightingale uit te neem. Sy lees op pad huis toe en omdat sy weet Mamma gaan haar vir die res van die middag en aand met take besig hou, loop sy sonder haas. Sy kom by die agterste gaasdeur in en druk die boek onder haar matras in voordat sy ingaan om Mamma met aandete te help. Sy dek die tafel en maak slaai, en later dek sy af en verhit water om die skottelgoed te was. Cloe gaan haal haar lêer met glansfoto’s van filmsterre en bestudeer rokpatrone terwyl Rikka vir Pappa teken waar hy in sy stoel sit en lees. Mamma sit haar skryfbenodigdhede op die tafel neer.

Briewe, briewe, briewe. Mamma is altyd besig om vir iemand te skryf. Soms wonder Hildemara of haar ma liewer is vir al daardie mense in ander dele van die wêreld as vir haar eie gesin.

Pappa gaan vroeg slaap. Mamma volg hom. "Moenie te laat opbly nie, meisies."

Toe Cloe en Rikka klaar is met hulle speletjie, haal Hildemara die boek onder haar matras uit. "Ek sal oor 'n paar minute bed toe kom."

***

Mamma is by die werkstafel besig om 'n pasteikors uit te rol toe Hildemara by die voordeur inkom. Die biografie wat sy weggesteek het, lê op die kombuistafel. Sy voel hoe sy warm word toe Mamma oor haar skouer kyk. "Ek het jou matras sien opstaan en 'n boek gevoel. Ek het verwag om Jane Austen daar te kry. *Pride and Prejudice* of *Sense and Sensibility*. Ek het gedink jy sou so iets lees."

"Dis 'n biografie, Mamma. Florence Nightingale was 'n verpleegster."

"Ek weet wat dit is! En ek weet wie sy was."

Hildemara neem die boek en mik na die agterdeur.

"Kom sit daardie boek hier neer, Hildemara."

"Dit is 'n biblioteekboek, Mamma. Ek moet dit terugneem."

"Dit moet eers aan die einde van die week in wees, tensy jy dit al deurgelees het." Mamma lê die kors oor 'n tertbak. "Het jy?" Sy druk dit teen die bodem vas en keer 'n bak ontpitte kersies daarin uit.

"Ja, Mamma." Hildie staan en kyk hoe Mamma die boonste kors uitrol. Dit neem haar net sekondes om dit bo-oor die kersies te sprei, die ekstra kors af te sny, die rante vas te knyp en gaatjies in die bolaag te steek.

"Ek dink nie ek sal 'n tert ooit so goed of so vinnig soos Mamma kan maak nie."

"Waarskynlik nie." Mamma gooi die vadoek oor haar skouer en staan hande op die heupe na haar en kyk. "Maar dis ook nie regtig wat jy wil doen nie, of hoe?"

Hildemara laat sak haar kop.

"Of hoe?" Mamma praat harder.

"Nee, Mamma."

"Hoeveel keer het jy daardie boek gelees?" Mamma wys met haar ken na die aanstootlike biografie. "Twee, drie keer?"

Hildemara besluit dis beter om nie te antwoord nie. Sy voel blootgestel genoeg sonder om haar hart oop te maak.

"Dis nie Florence Nightingale wat jou fassineer nie, nè? Dis *verpleging*. Ek wed jou dis sedert mevrou King met al haar stories hiernatoe gekom het. Kom ek vertel jou iets, Hildemara Rose. Sy het jou kop vol romantiese nonsens gestop. Ek sal jou vertel wat verpleging regtig is. 'n Verpleegster is nie beter as 'n bediende nie. Ek moes die grootste deel van my lewe vloere skrop, kombuise skoonmaak en klere was. Met daardie brein van jou kan jy baie meer doen as om vir die res van jou lewe bedpanne leeg te maak en beddens op te maak! In my oë is verpleging niks beter as die armsalige agtergrond waaruit ek gekom het nie!"

Hildemara voel tegelykertyd seer en kwaad. "Verpleging gaan oor meer as bedpanne en beddegoed, Mamma. Dis 'n eerbare beroep. Dis 'n manier om mense te help."

"En dis wat jy die beste doen, nè? Om te *help*. Om te *dien*. Jy is reeds 'n uitgeknipte bediende. Die Here weet, die laaste ses jaar was jy myne. Maak nie saak wat ek alles van jou verwag het nie, jy het nooit gekla nie." Sy klink kwaad.

"Mamma en Pappa werk so hard. Dis tog net reg dat ek my deel moet doen."

"Jou deel! Jy het meer as jou deel gedoen."

"Mamma het hulp nodig gehad."

"Ek het nie jou hulp nodig nie."

Sy sluk haar trane, want sy weet dat Mamma net nog kwater gaan wees as sy huil. "Mamma is nooit tevrede nie, maak nie saak wat ek doen nie. Ek weet nie hoekom ek so hard probeer nie."

"Ek ook nie! Wat wil jy hê? 'n Medalje vir martelaarskap?"

"Nee, maar 'n bietjie erkenning van Mamma sal gaaf wees."

Mamma se oë blits. Sy druk haar hande in haar roksakke en sug. "Die lewe gaan nie daaroor om ander tevrede te stel nie, Hildemara. 'n Mens moet besluit wie jy is en wat jy uit die lewe wil hê, en dit dan najaag."

Hoe kan sy Mamma laat verstaan? "Vir my gaan dit daaroor om te doen wat die Here wil hê, Mamma. Dit gaan daaroor om mekaar lief te hê. Om te dien."

Mamma knip haar oë. "Dis die heel eerste keer dat jy met my reguit is, Hildemara Rose." Sy glimlag hartseer. "Dis jammer ons kan nie saamstem nie."

"Ek's jammer, Mamma."

Haar oë blits. "Lyk my jy kan eenvoudig nie ophou verskoning maak nie. Jy beter vinnig begin leer om nie jammer te sê vir wie jy is nie."

Sy tel 'n waslap op, vee die tafel af en gooi dit in die wasbak. "As jy wil leer verpleeg, moet jy werk kry en begin spaar, want ek gaan nie daarvoor betaal nie."

Vreemd genoeg maak die verwerping nie so seer as wat Hildemara verwag het nie. "Ek het nie gevra nie."

"Nee, jy het nie. Maar aan die anderkant, jy sou ook nie. Jy sou nie glo dat jy die reg het om enigiets te vra nie." Sy skuif die boek oor die tafel. "Vat jou boek."

Hildie neem die boek en kyk vir 'n lang oomblik daarna. Toe sy opkyk, sien sy dat Mamma op 'n vreemde manier na haar kyk.

"Daar het een goeie ding uit hierdie gesprek gekom, Hildemara Rose. Ten minste weet ek nou dat jy nie vir die res van jou lewe aan my rokspante gaan vasklou of onder my dak gaan bly nie. Jy sal nie eendag wegloop of in die koue sit totdat jy verkluim nie. Jy staan op die rand van die nes, my kind. Jy sal binnekort hier wegvlieg." Sy glimlag en haar oë straal. "En dit maak my bly. Dit maak my baie, baie bly!"

Hildemara klim op haar bed, hou die boek styf teen haar vas en huil. Wat sy ook al voorheen gedink het, Hildemara besef nou dat Mamma nie kan wag om van haar ontslae te raak nie.

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Hildemara se eerste dag in die hoërskool is ook die dag waarop sy haar vriendin Elizabeth aan Bernie afstaan. Sy het altyd vermoed dat Elizabeth heimlik van Bernie hou, maar Bernie het nooit enige belangstelling in Elizabeth getoon nie. Hy was te besig met sy sport en kattekwaad en vriende om hom aan meisies te steur. Op hulle eerste skooldag sit Hildie en Elizabeth op die gras en praat oor die tweede somerkamp en haar drome om verpleegster te word. Bernie staan met 'n vreemde uitdrukking na hulle en luister.

"Haai, Bernie." Hildemara skerm haar oë teen die son. "Wat doen jy in die juniors se area?"

"Wil jy my nie aan jou vriendin voorstel nie, Hildie?"

Sy dink hy grap sommer, maar speel saam. "Elizabeth Kenney, dis my ouer broer, Bernhard Niclas Waltert. Bernie, dit is Elizabeth. Nou wat wil jy hê? Ons praat en jy pla."

Bernie hurk, sy oë op Elizabeth. "Jy het rêrig verander dié somer."

Elizabeth se wange word rooi. Sy laat sak haar kop en kyk deur haar wimpers na hom. "Ek hoop jy bedoel ten goede."

Hy grinnik. "Beslis, ja."

Hildemara gluur ergerlik na hom. "Moet jy nie êrens anders wees nie, Bernie? Ek sien Eddie en Wallie is daar oorkant besig om basketbal te speel."

Hy gaan sit en leun op sy elmboog. "Het jy nie leerwerk nie, Hildie? Of êrens anders waar jy moet wees nie?" Hy kyk nie na haar terwyl hy praat nie, en Elizabeth kyk ook nie weg van hom nie. Bernie kon netsowel gesê het: "Vat die pad."

"Ons was besig om te praat, Bernie."

Sy mondhoek lig, sy oë steeds in dié van Elizabeth. "Gee julle om as ek by julle sit?"

"Nee." Elizabeth klink bietjie kortasem. "Natuurlik nie."

Hildemara rol haar oë. Sy kyk van haar broer na haar beste vriendin en weet dat alles in 'n breukdeel van 'n sekonde verander het. Nie een van die twee kom agter dat sy opstaan nie. Toe sy wegloop, roep hulle haar nie terug nie. Toe die skool uitkom, sien sy Bernie saam met Elizabeth loop, haar boeksak oor sy skouer. Nie een van die twee hoor toe sy na hulle roep nie.

Almal in die skool het 'n ogie op Bernie. Hoekom moes hy sy visier op Elizabeth instel? "Dankie," prewel sy binnensmonds. "Dankie dat jy my enigste vriendin gevat het."

Sy kry Cloe en Rikka aan die oorkant van die hoofpad, naby die laerskool. "Loop julle solank. Daar is iets wat ek moet doen." Mamma het gesê sy moet haar eie geld vir haar verpleegopleiding verdien, en sy kan netsowel nou begin. Toe haar susters koers kry huis toe, vee Hildemara haar natgeswete hande aan haar romp af en gaan by die apteek cum kafee in. Dit kos haar 'n paar minute se ronddrentel tussen die rakke voordat sy genoeg moed het om mevrou Pitt te vra of sy iemand nodig het om agter die toonbank te werk en koeldrank en melkskommels te verkoop.

Mevrou Pitt is besig om 'n glas af te droog. "Het jy iemand in gedagte?"

Hildie sluk. "Ek."

Mevrou Pitt lag. "Jy kan môre begin. Ek het oorgenoeg wat ek eerder sal doen as om koeldranke en melkskommels aan tieners te bedien." Dan roep sy luidkeels: "Het jy gehoor, Howard? Hildemara Waltert gaan van môre af by ons werk." Sy knipoog vir Hildemara.

“Ek sal jou wys hoe alles werk. Dis heel eenvoudig. En met jou hier, sal ons dalk meer tieners trek.”

Hildemara wil nie vir haar sê dat sy eerder nie moet hoop nie.

Op pad huis toe voel dit vir Hildie asof sy op ’n wolkie loop. Sy verlustig haar in haar geheim terwyl sy haar take vinnig afhandel.

Hildie dek tafel en toe hulle later aansit, is sy gretig om haar aankondiging te maak. Maar almal het baie om te sê. Bernie sê dat hy laat is omdat hy saam met Elizabeth Kenney huis toe geloop het en haar ma hom vir koekies en melk genooi het. Clotilde vra Mamma vir ’n dollar om materiaal te gaan koop. Rikka staar die niet in, ongetwyfeld besig om aan haar volgende skets te dink, totdat Mamma sê sy moet begin eet.

Hulle het amper klaar geëet voordat die stemme stil word en Hildie haar aankondiging kan maak. “Ek het werk gekry.”

Pappa kyk op. “Werk?”

“Ek werk van môre af ná skool in die Pitts se kafee.”

Mamma glimlag effens. “Is dit so?”

Pappa vee sy mond met ’n servet af. “Ek hou nie van die idee nie. Jy het jou skoolwerk en wat van Mamma? Sy het jou hulp by die huis nodig.”

“Ek sal regkom sonder haar.” Mamma sit haar servet op die tafel neer. “En as ek hulp nodig het, het ek twee ander dogters wat kan inspring.”

Clotilde gee Hildemara ’n vies kyk. “Dankie.” Rikka eet onverpoosd verder, steeds in haar eie wêreld.

Pappa frons vir Mamma. “Het jy hiervan geweet?”

Sy staan op en begin die borde afdek. “Dit moes tog seker vroeër of later begin. Ouers kan nie vir altyd vir hulle kinders sorg nie. En behoort ook nie.”

“Hoekom moet ek werk en Bernie hoef nie?” kla Clotilde.

Bernie sit sy vurk neer. “Ons kan enige tyd ruil as jy wil. Ek sal die hoenders kos gee en tafel dek. Jy kan Pappa help om te ploeg en te plant en te oes.”

“Ek werk! Ek het daardie hemp gemaak wat jy aanhet!”

Pappa slaan met sy vuis op die tafel. “Genoeg!” ’n Glimlag pluk aan Mamma se mond, maar verdwyn toe Pappa vanaf die kop van die tafel na haar kyk. “Het jy geweet Hildemara soek werk?”

“Ek het vir haar gesê sy moet.”

“Hoekom?”

“Vra haar. Sy kan self praat.” Sy gee Hildie ’n kil kyk, haar

wenkbroue uitdagend gelig. “Of kan jy nie?” Dit klink nie soos ’n vraag nie.

Pappa staar na Hildemara. “Nou ja?”

Sy haal diep asem asof om haar hart tot bedaring te bring, en verduidelik wat sy vir die toekoms beplan. Toe sy klaar is, staar almal na haar.

Pappa verbreek die stilte. “O. Nou goed. Hoekom het jy nie so gesê nie?”

“Aangesien jy nog nie begin werk het nie, kan jy help afdek, Hildemara.” Mamma praat eers weer toe sy die laaste bord vir Hildemara gee om af te droog. “Wanneer is jy van plan om te leer? Jy kan nie toelaat dat jou punte val nie.”

“Tussen klasse. Pouses. Ek werk net tot sesuur.”

“Jy sal jou kos moet opwarm as jy by die huis kom.”

“Ek sal regkom.” Sy het gehoop Mamma sê sy sal dit mis om haar by die huis te hê. Sy moes van beter geweet het.

“Dis dalk ’n goeie idee om ’n spaarrekening by die bank te gaan oopmaak sodat jy nie al jou geld uitgee nie.”

“Ek was van plan om dit te doen sodra ek die eerste keer betaal word.”

“Mooi.” Mamma laat die res van die opruimwerk aan Hildemara oor en gaan uit om op die stoepswaai te gaan sit.

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Pappa sê dat die Depressie nie vir altyd sal aanhou nie, maar die swaar tye bring meer rondreisende verkoopsmanne na die plaas toe. Die boere vaar nie so sleg soos die meeste van die ander mense nie. Hulle weet hoe om hulle eie kos te produseer. Selfs al het die prys vir amandels en rosyne geval, bekommer Pappa en Mamma hulle nie oor wat hulle op tafel gaan hê nie. Pappa het genoeg geld vir die verband en belasting. “As ons nie uitkom nie, kan ek gaan werk,” sê Mamma. “Meneer Smith het my ’n werk by sy bakkery aangebied.”

“Jy is tog seker nie van plan om vir hom te werk nie?”

“Hy sweer hy het niks met die Herkners se brand te doen gehad nie.”

“En jy glo hom.”

“Jy is die een wat altyd sê ek mag nie oordeel nie, Niclas.”

“Om te oordeel is een ding, maar om jou gesonde verstand te

gebruik is iets anders."

Mamma sug. "Ek het nee gesê, maar as ons die geld nodig het, weet ek waar om werk te kry."

"Begin om meer hier by ons te bak. Vat jou *beignets* en *Tortes* vir Hardesty. Hy sal dit vir jou verkoop."

Mamma gee 'n laggie. "As jy *beignets* en *Tortes* of enigiets anders wil hê, sê net so, Niclas."

"So." Hy trek haar op sy skoot neer en fluister in haar oor.

***

Wanneer die ander gaan fliek, gaan Hildemara werk toe. Sy ontmoet meer kinders in die kafee as gedurende haar agt en 'n half jaar op skool in Murietta.

Wanneer hulle klaar gefliek het, kom die kinders vir koeldranke en sit oral by die tafels en gesels. Sommige van die grootmense los vir haar fooitjies.

Sy geniet dit om te werk. Sy geniet die rumoerigheid van tieners wat kom en gaan. Sy geniet dit om geld te verdien, want elke dag in die kafee bring haar nader aan haar doel. Terwyl sy bestellings neem, melkskommels en koeldrank met roomys maak, glase was en tafels skoonmaak, droom sy van die dag wanneer sy in 'n wit uniform en kappie in 'n hospitaal gaan werk en die siekes vertroos. Dalk sal sy eendag China toe gaan en in 'n sendinghospitaal werk, of siek babas in die Belgiese Kongo versorg of 'n aantreklike, toegewyde dokter help om 'n epidemie in Indië te bekamp.

Op 'n dag kom mevrou King met 'n voorskrif van dokter Whiting daar aan. Terwyl sy wag dat meneer Pitt die voorskrif opmaak, kom sit sy by die toonbank en bestel 'n koeldrank. Hildemara vertel haar van haar plan om haar opleiding by die Merritt Hospitaal in Oakland te gaan doen. "Dis wonderlik, Hildemara! Wanneer jy klaarmaak met skool, sal ek 'n aanbevelingsbrief vir jou skryf."

Hildemara se eerste jaar op hoërskool verloop in 'n waas van studies en werk. Toe Mamma vir die volgende somerkamp begin regmaak, vra Hildie of sy sonder haar sal klaarkom. Natuurlik sê Mamma ja. Hildemara begin met 'n tweede werk by die Fulsomes se hoenderplaas waar sy vere pluk voordat die voëls mark toe gaan. Sy word per hoender betaal en leer gou om vinnig te werk.

Sy weet presies hoeveel geld sy vir haar opleiding en uniform gaan

nodig hê, en spaar elke sent. Sy sal ook die volgende benodigdhede moet aanskaf: ’n sakhorlosie met ’n tweede wyser om hartkloppe te tel en ’n inkpen om aantekeninge op pasiëntkaarte te maak. Mamma en Pappa het reeds planne gemaak om Bernie kollege toe te stuur wanneer hy aan die einde van die volgende jaar sy skoolopleiding voltooi. Elke ekstra dollar sal nou aan sy opleiding gewy word.

Hildie het al meer as een maal gesien hoe Pappa vir Bernie ’n dollar in die hand stop om Elizabeth Vrydagaande fliek toe te neem. “Hy is jonk. Hy moet die lewe ’n bietjie geniet.”

Mamma het dit ook gesien, en sy protesteer. “En wat van die dogters? Hulle is jonk. Hulle wil ook die lewe geniet. Gaan jy elke keer vir hulle ’n dollar gee wanneer hulle vra?”

Hildemara druk haar hande oor haar ore. Sy haat dit wanneer haar ouers oor geld baklei. Sy sweer dat sy hulle nooit vir ’n sent sal vra nie. Sy sal vir haarself sorg.

## Chapter 27

**1932**

Bernie graduated with honors. From the first day of school in Murietta to the last, Hildemara's brother had been the shining star.

Elizabeth sat with the family through the ceremony. When Hildie heard her sniffling, she handed her a handkerchief. Elizabeth wouldn't be seeing much of Bernie that summer. Mama wanted him on hand to organize the Summer Bedlam work crew, and Papa needed him for harvesting.

Once a week, they let him loose and he went into town to see Elizabeth. He typically came home depressed. "I wish I didn't have to go so far away to school."

Mama snorted. "If you were any closer, you'd never get any studying done. You'd be too busy chasing after Elizabeth's skirts."

Clotilde snickered. "He doesn't have to chase her."

Bernie's face turned red. "Shut up, Cloe." He left the table.

Elizabeth came into the soda fountain almost every day through summer, bemoaning how much she missed Bernie. Hildemara let her talk.

When school started again, she came with Hildemara and sat at the counter, doing her homework. "You watch, Hildie. Your brother is going to meet some pretty college girl and forget all about me. It's two whole years until we graduate!"

"He writes more to you than he does to Mama and Papa."

"He only wrote twice last week."

"Well, that's twice more than he's written home, and he's been gone a month."

When Bernie came home for Christmas break, he spent more time in Murietta at the Kenneys' than he did at home. At least until Mama put her foot down. "Since we're paying your way through college, you can help around here."

"Mama! I haven't seen Elizabeth since summer, and not much then. She might lose interest if I don't—"

"The roof needs repair, and we need a new garbage hole dug and the old one covered. If you have time after those things are done, then you can go court Miss Kenney, though I think she's in the palm of your hand already."

Papa wasn't so adamant about making Bernie spend more time at home. "He's in love, Marta. Slack the reins a little."

"He'll have plenty of time for galloping after Elizabeth after he finishes college. And he'll have something to offer then."

* * *

Summer Bedlam had proven so successful, Mama had been holding it every year. The summer after Bernie's first year of college was the fifth session. Bernie had outgrown snipe hunts, swimming in a ditch where the water only came up to his navel, and managing a work crew of "city softies." He worked alongside Papa through the long, hot days of irrigation and harvest, then went off with his friends on the bicycle Mama had given him the first year for "keeping the boys in line."

Hildemara didn't receive a reward for the work she did helping Mama cook, clean, and wash clothes. She also took care of any first aid needs, but she didn't mind that.

Boys kept coming, younger brothers and friends of friends. Papa never lost patience with the new boys.

Hildemara wished Mama had patience for her, but it seemed to wear thinner by the year. She'd snap orders and expect Hildie to know what she wanted before she wanted it. Hildemara tried to please her, but never knew whether she did or not. Mama never said one way or the other. For a woman who spoke her mind about everything else, Mama never seemed to say what she thought about her eldest daughter. Then again, maybe it was better she didn't.

Hildemara kept building her savings account through sophomore and junior years. No sooner had Clotilde entered high school than Mama started talking about sending her to design school. Hildemara had to listen to them talk about it over dinner. Clotilde set her sights on the Otis Art Institute, and Mama didn't seem to think it out of reach to help her with expenses. If that wasn't enough salt in her wounds, Hildemara had to listen to Mama prodding Rikka to spend more time drawing and painting so she could put together a portfolio for submission to the administrators at the California School of Fine Arts.

Mama never told Cloe or Rikki to find a job and pay their own way.

* * *

**1934**

When Hildie's senior class Slack Day rolled around, she took extra hours at Pitt's instead of playing hooky with the rest of her friends. Clotilde came in for a soda after school, spending a portion of

the allowance Mama now gave her. "Mama's going into Modesto to do some shopping. You should come and pick out something to wear for graduation. They have some nice dress stores there."

"Mama didn't offer to buy me a graduation dress, and I'm not spending a penny of my savings on one."

"What are you going to wear?"

"The dress I wear to church."

"That old thing? Hildie, you can't! Everyone else will be wearing something new, something special."

"Well, I won't be, and I don't care." She had no intention of wasting hard-earned money on a new dress. "It doesn't matter, Cloe. No one is going to remember what I wore five minutes after I receive my diploma."

"Well, whose fault is that? All you do is bury your nose in a book or work here." She waved her hand dismissively.

Annoyed, Hildemara looked across the counter at her sister. "You want to know something, Cloe? I've worked every hour and every day I can and I barely have enough saved for one year of nurses' training. *One year*, Cloe. And it takes *three years* to become a registered nurse." She felt the prick of tears coming and lowered her chin, scrubbing at the counter until she had control of her emotions. "Bernie and you and Rikki will have it all handed to you on a silver platter."

"You should talk to Mama. She'll help you."

"Mama's the one who told me I had to earn my own way. She thinks nursing is a form of servitude." Hildemara shook her head. "I can't ask her for anything, Cloe. Bernie still has two more years of college. You'll go to the Otis Art Institute and Rikki will be in San Francisco a few years after that. Papa and Mama only have so much. I can't ask Mama for anything."

"What is it Mama says? Nothing ventured, nothing gained?"

"I'll venture to Oakland and pray God gives me the rest of what I need." She didn't want to ask Mama when she knew the answer would be no.

"You're more stubborn than she is." Cloe finished her Coke and left Pitt's.

The night before graduation, Hildemara came home dog-tired and depressed. Maybe she could skip the ceremony and go in for her diploma later. She could say she was sick. It might be nice to sleep all day, if Mama would let her.

As she came in the back door, she saw a blue organza dress

hanging on the foot of her bunk bed. Cloe came through the back door from the kitchen. "It's for your graduation. What do you think of it?"

Hildemara dropped her book bag and pressed her knuckles against her quivering lips.

Cloe pushed her into the bedroom. "Come on. Try it on. I can't wait to see how it looks."

"Where did you get it?"

"Where do you think? I made it!" She bustled around Hildie, tugging her sweater off. "I've never worked so hard on anything." Hildemara barely had her school dress off before Cloe pulled the new one over her head, tugging it down. She pinched one side and then the other. "Just needs a few tucks and it'll be a perfect fit. We've been working on it for days!"

"We?"

"Mama bought the fabric and I designed the dress. We've both been putting it together. There won't be another like it." She stepped back, admiring her work. "It's fabulous!" She frowned. "What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

Hildemara sat on Rikki's bed, grabbed her discarded dress, and tried to stop the tears.

"You like it, don't you?" Cloe sounded worried.

Hildemara nodded.

"I knew you would." Cloe sounded her confident self again. "And I knew you wanted a new dress for graduation, but you'd rather die than ask." She laughed, pleased. "You said people won't remember you five minutes after graduation, but they'll remember this dress. And someday, you'll be able to say you were Clotilde Waltert's first model."

Hildie laughed and hugged her.

When she tried to thank Mama later, Mama waved her off. "Bernhard had a new suit for his graduation. You needed a dress. I don't want people saying I don't take proper care of my children."

Hildemara didn't say any more about it. When she put the dress on the next day, Papa smiled and gave a nod of approval. "You look beautiful."

Hildie turned. "The dress is beautiful."

Papa put his hands on her shoulders. "*You* are beautiful. When you cross that platform and get your diploma, you'll make me and Mama proud. Your mother never had the opportunities you've had, Hildemara. Her father took her out of school when she was twelve. It's

why she's so dead-set on all her children getting as much schooling as they can." He tipped her chin. "Don't tell her I told you she never went to high school. It's a sore spot with her."

"Mama has the equivalent of a college degree, Papa. She speaks four languages and runs a school every summer. I haven't gotten an answer from Merritt yet. I may be working at Pitt's and living at home for the rest of my life." That certainly wouldn't please her mother.

"You'll have an answer soon enough, and I've no doubt it will be the one you're waiting for." A car horn honked twice. He patted her cheek. "Better go. Mama's waiting to drive you into town."

She hugged him. "She's coming back for Cloe and Rikki as soon as she drops me off. Are you walking to town or riding back with Mama later?"

He grimaced. "I'm riding. God, have mercy. I don't want to miss my daughter's graduation."

Mama didn't say a word on the drive to town. When Hildemara tried again to thank her for the dress, Mama's mouth tightened and she shook her head, staring at the road ahead.

As Hildemara crossed the platform that evening in her new organza dress and received her diploma, she paused long enough to look out into the sea of faces. She spotted Mama, Papa, Clotilde, and Rikka sitting in the second row. Papa, Cloe, and Rikki clapped and cheered. Mama sat with her hands folded in her lap, head down, so Hildie couldn't see her face.

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*Hildemara Rose graduated from high school today. When she received her diploma, I feared I'd embarrass her with my tears. I am so proud of her! Hildemara Rose is the first girl from my side of our family to finish school.*

*God willing, and the crops are good, she will go on. I wanted her to go to university, but her heart is set on nurses' training. She still has a servant's heart. She dreams of being the next Florence Nightingale. If the Samuel Merritt Hospital School of Nursing refuses her, I swear I will go down and pry open the doors with my bare hands.*

* * *

"There's a letter for you on the table." Mama nodded toward the envelope propped up against a mason jar full of roses.

Heart tripping, Hildie read the return address: *Samuel Merritt Hospital School of Nursing.*

Mama looked over her glasses as she mended a pair of Papa's overalls. "You won't know what it says unless you open it."

Hands shaking, Hildemara grabbed a knife from the drawer and carefully slit open the envelope. Her excitement died as she read. Mama dropped her mending on her lap. "What's the matter? They don't want you?"

"I meet all the qualifications except one: I'm not eighteen." She wouldn't turn eighteen until January. She would have to wait until the next class started the following fall.

"You don't have to be eighteen to go here." Mama took another envelope out of her apron pocket and held it out. It had already been opened.

Hildemara read the embossed printing in the left corner. "The University of California in Berkeley? Mama, I can't go there."

"Why not?"

Hildemara wanted to weep in frustration. "Because I'm still saving up for nursing school!" She tossed the letter on the kitchen table. "Besides that, a university isn't for someone like me." Fighting tears, she headed for the back door.

Mama threw her mending on the floor and stood. "Don't you ever say anything like that again! I swear I'll slap you silly if you do!" She grabbed the letter from the table and held it up under Hildemara's nose. "You have the brain! You have the grades! Why shouldn't you go to college?"

Hildemara cried out in frustration. "Tuition, plus books, plus room and board in a dorm . . . I've barely saved enough to pay the uniform fee and one year of tuition at Merritt. And that's where I want to go! After six months' training, I'll be paid by the hospital. I'll have to save every penny so I can pay for my second and third year!"

Mama flapped the envelope. "This is the University of California in Berkeley, Hildemara!" Her voice rose in frustration. "A *university*!"

Clearly, Mama wasn't listening. "It's one year, Mama, and I'll have nothing at the end of it."

"Nothing? What do you mean, *nothing*? You'll have one year at one of the best universities in the country!" She flapped the envelope again. "That's worth more than—" She stopped and turned away.

Hildemara pressed her lips together so she wouldn't cry. "More than three years of nurses' training, Mama? That's it, isn't it?"

Mama made fists and pounded them on the kitchen table so hard it bounced. Shoulders drooping, she swore twice in German.

For once, Hildemara didn't cower. She spoke her mind. "You let Cloe and Rikki dream their dreams, but I haven't the right, have I, Mama? No matter how hard I try, I'm never going to come up to your expectations. And I don't care anymore. I want to be a nurse, Mama." Something erupted inside her and Hildie screamed. *"A nurse!"*

Mama rubbed her face and let out her breath. "I know, but you'll have to wait, won't you? And while you're waiting, why waste your time at Pitt's when you could go to Berkeley? Even one semester—"

"The money I've saved is for nursing school."

"Then I'll send you! I'll pay for the year!"

"I can tell how much you like that idea. Keep your money! Spend it on Cloe and Rikka. Otis Art Institute and the California School of Fine Arts will probably cost as much as the university. And you promised them."

Mama glared at her, eyes overbright. "It never occurred to you I'd help you, did it?"

"You're not offering help, Mama! You're sending me where *you* want to go!" As soon as the words flew out her mouth, she knew the truth of them. She could see it in Mama's face.

Mama sat and put her face in her hands. "Maybe I am." She let out a deep sigh and put her arms on the table as though bracing herself.

Hildemara started to say she was sorry and caught herself. She felt a sudden wave of pity for her mother and pulled out a chair. "What would you have studied, Mama?"

"*Any*thing. *Every*thing." She waved her hand as though chasing a fly away. "It's water under a bridge." She skewered Hildemara with her gaze. "What do you plan to do for the next year?"

"Work. Save."

Mama's shoulders sagged. "I've been harder on you than the others because I felt I had to be. Well, you've finally stood up to me. I'll give you that much." She stood and turned her back on Hildemara. Grabbing up her sewing, she sat and went back to mending Papa's pants.

* * *

Hildemara found a better job at Wheeler's Truck Stop on the highway. She worked longer hours and made good tips. When she came home, she often found Mama sitting at the table writing letters. Sometimes she'd be adding notes to her old brown leather journal. "How was your day?" she'd ask without looking up.

"Fine."

They didn't seem to have anything to say to one another.

When the time finally came for Hildemara to leave, she packed the few things she would need and bought her train ticket to Oakland. Mama made beef Wellington for dinner. Hildemara thanked her for making such a feast the day before she left. Mama shrugged. "We did the same for Bernhard."

Cloe jumped up as soon as dinner ended. "Stay put, Hildie!" She dashed into the front bedroom and came back with a pile of wrapped presents. She put them down in front of Hildie.

"What is all this?"

"What do you think, dopey? Your going-away presents!" Clotilde grinned and clapped her hands as she sat. "Open mine first! It's the biggest one."

"Another creation by Clotilde?" Hildemara gasped when she pulled out a navy blue dress with white cuffs and bright red buttons. A red belt, red pumps, and a red purse were in the bottom of the box.

"You'll look like a million dollars!"

Papa gave her a small, black leather-bound Bible with a red ribbon. "If you read it every morning and evening, it'll be just like we're sitting together in the living room, *ja?* The same way we have since you were a baby."

Hildemara came around the table and kissed his cheek.

Bernie gave her five dollars. "Should've been for your graduation, but better late than never." He said he'd earned good money selling his grafted lemon and lime and orange trees to a Sacramento nursery. "I plan on spending a small fortune on an engagement ring for Elizabeth."

"Don't steal your sister's thunder." Mama nodded at the last two presents. "You have two more to open, Hildemara Rose."

Rikki had framed a drawing of Mama knitting while Papa read his Bible. Hildemara's eyes welled with tears. "Someday I'll make an oil painting of that for you, Hildie. If you'd like."

"I'd like, but don't ask me to give this one back."

The last present was a small box, simply wrapped in brown butcher paper with a red ribbon tied in a bow. "Is this from you, Mama?"

"Must be, since you've opened one from everyone else." Mama folded her hands tightly in front of her.

Hildemara couldn't speak when she opened it.

“It’s a pocket watch with a second hand, like one they use in a race,” Mama told the others.

Hildie looked at Mama through tears, unable to utter a word. She wanted to throw her arms around her mother. She wanted to kiss her.

Mama stood abruptly. “Clotilde, clear away the boxes and paper. Rikka, you can help clear up tonight.”

When Hildie got up next the morning, Papa told her he’d be driving her to the train station in the wagon. “I have to go in for supplies anyway.”

“Where’s Mama?” She wanted to talk to her before leaving.

“Sleeping in.”

“That’s a first.” The closed bedroom door looked like a fortress wall.

Papa stood on the station platform, waiting with Hildie until the train whistle blew and the conductor called for all to board. He held her shoulders firmly and kissed her cheek. “One from me.” He kissed the other. “One from Mama.” Picking up her suitcase, he handed it to her, his blue eyes moist. “God will be with you. Don’t forget to talk to Him.”

“I won’t, Papa.” Tears streamed down her cheeks. “But I didn’t get to say thank you to Mama. I couldn’t say it last night.”

“You didn’t have to say anything, Hildemara.” His voice caught. He waved and headed off, calling back over his shoulder. “Go on now. Make us proud!” He strode across the station platform.

Hildemara climbed aboard the train and found a seat. Her heart leaped as the train lurched forward and began to move smoothly along the tracks. She caught a glimpse of Papa sitting on the high wagon seat. He wiped his eyes and untied the reins. When the train whistle blew, Hildemara raised her hand and waved. Papa never looked back.

# Hoofstuk 27

## 1932

Bernie slaag sy eindeksamen met lof. Hildemara se broer was vanaf sy eerste skooldag in Murietta die uitblinker.

Elizabeth sit by die gesin tydens die seremonie. Toe Hildie haar hoor snuif, gee sy vir haar 'n tissue. Elizabeth gaan in die somer nie baie van Bernie te sien kry nie. Mamma wil hê hy moet die somerkamp se werkspanne organiseer en Pappa het hom nodig om met die oes te help.

Hy word een maal 'n week vergun om in die dorp vir Elizabeth te gaan kuier. Hy is gewoonlik neerslagtig wanneer hy terugkom. "Ek wens ek kon nader aan Murietta studeer het."

Mamma snork. "As jy nader was, sou jy nooit aan jou boeke geraak het nie. Jy sou heeldag agter Elizabeth aangeloop het."

Clotilde gee 'n laggie. "Dis nie nodig dat hy agter haar aanloop nie."

Bernie word bloedrooi. "Bly stil, Cloe." Hy loop sommer uit.

Elizabeth kom amper elke dag dié somer na die koeldrankbuffet toe en kla oor hoeveel sy Bernie mis. Hildemara laat haar praat.

Toe die skool weer begin, kom sy saam met Hildemara en gaan sit by die toonbank en doen haar huiswerk. "Jy sal sien, Hildie. Jou broer gaan nog 'n mooi kollegemeisie ontmoet en heeltemal van my vergeet. Dis 'n volle twee jaar voordat hy klaarmaak!"

"Hy skryf meer vir jou as vir Pappa en Mamma."

"Verlede week het hy net twee maal geskryf."

"Wel, dis twee maal meer was wat hy huis toe geskryf het, en hy is maar 'n maand weg."

Toe Bernie die Kersvakansie huis toe kom, bring hy meer tyd in Murietta by die Kenneys deur as by die huis. Totdat Mamma haar voet neersit. "Aangesien ons jou studiegeld betaal, kan jy gerus kom hand bysit op die plaas."

"Mamma! Ek het Elizabeth die somer laas gesien, en toe ook nie

baie nie. Sy gaan dalk belangstelling verloor as ek nie – ”

“Die dak moet reggemaak word en ons het ’n nuwe vullisgat nodig en die ander een moet toegegooi word. As al daardie dinge gedoen is, kan jy juffrou Kenney die hof gaan maak, al dink ek sy eet reeds uit jou hand.”

Pappa voel nie so ernstig oor die hoeveelheid tyd wat Bernie op die plaas moet deurbring nie. “Hy is verlief, Marta. Verslap die leisels ’n bietjie.”

“Hy sal oorgenoeg tyd hê om agter Elizabeth aan te loop wanneer hy afgestudeer is. En dan sal hy iets hê om haar te bied.”

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Die somerkamp is so ’n groot sukses dat Mamma dit nou elke jaar hou. Gedurende die somer ná Bernie se eerste jaar op kollege word die vyfde een aangebied.

Bernie geniet dit nie meer om prêriehase te bekruip nie, en is nie meer lus om in slote te swem wat net tot by sy naeltjie kom of om stadsjapies in werkspanne te organiseer nie. Nadat hy Pappa heeldag in die skroeiende hitte op die land gehelp het, gaan kuier hy by sy vriende op die fiets wat Mamma hom die eerste jaar gegee het nadat hy “die seuns in bedwang gehou het”.

Hildemara help Mamma met die kos, sy maak skoon en was die wasgoed, maar sy word nie vir haar werk beloon nie. Sy is ook daar wanneer enige eerstehulp toegepas moet word, maar dit pla haar nie.

Die seuns bly kom, jonger broers en vriende se vriende. Pappa verloor nooit sy geduld met die nuwe seuns nie.

Hildemara wens dat Mamma soveel geduld met haar gehad het, maar dis asof dit elke jaar minder word. Sy blaf bevele en verwag van Hildie om te weet wat sy wil hê voordat sy dit sê. Hildemara probeer haar tevrede stel, maar weet nooit of sy daarin slaag nie. Mamma sê nooit of sy tevrede is of nie. Vir iemand wat altyd ’n opinie het, blyk Mamma nooit te sê wat sy van haar oudste dogter dink nie. Aan die ander kant, dalk is dit maar beter so.

Hildemara belê elke jaar geld in haar spaarrekening. Die oomblik toe Clotilde haar voet in die hoërskool sit, laat val Mamma dat sy haar eendag modeontwerp wil laat studeer. Hildemara moet die aand aan tafel na hulle gesprek sit en luister. Clotilde het haar oog op die Otis Art Institute, en dit lyk nie of Mamma dink haar studiegeld is ’n

probleem nie. Asof dit nie genoeg sout in haar wonde is nie, moet Hildemara aanhoor hoe Mamma Rikka aanspoor om meer te teken en te verf sodat sy 'n portfolio kan saamstel om aan die bestuur van die California School of Fine Arts voor te lê.

Mamma sê nooit dat Clotilde of Rikka 'n werk moet kry om vir hulleself betaal nie.

***

## 1934

Namate die einde van Hildie se skooljaar naderkom, werk sy ekstra ure by die Pitts se winkel in plaas daarvan om saam met haar maats te kuier. Eendag ná skool kom drink Clotilde 'n koeldrank. Sy betaal daarvoor met 'n gedeelte van die sakgeld wat Mamma haar nou gee. "Mamma gaan Modesto toe vir inkopies. Jy moet saamkom en iets uitkies wat jy vir jou diplomadag kan dra. Hulle het 'n paar baie mooi klerewinkels daar."

"Mamma het nie aangebied om vir my 'n rok te koop nie, en ek gaan nie 'n sent van my spaargeld daarop uitgee nie."

"Wat gaan jy dra?"

"My kerkrok."

"Daai ou ding? Hildie, jy kan nie! Al die ander gaan iets nuuts dra, iets spesiaals."

"Nie ek nie, en ek gee nie om nie." Sy is geensins van plan om haar swaarverdiende geld op 'n nuwe rok uit te gee nie. "Dit maak nie saak nie, Cloe. Niemand gaan onthou wat ek vir vyf minute nadat ek my diploma ontvang het, gedra het nie."

"Wel, wie se fout is dit? Al wat jy doen, is om jou neus in 'n boek te druk en hier te werk." Sy maak 'n afwysende gebaar.

Hildemara kyk ergerlik na haar suster. "Wil jy iets weet, Cloe? Ek werk elke beskikbare uur en elke beskikbare dag en ek het skaars genoeg gespaar vir een jaar se verpleegopleiding. *Een jaar*, Cloe. En dit neem *drie jaar* om 'n geregistreerde verpleegster te word." Toe sy haar oë voel brand, laat sak sy haar ken en skrop die toonbank totdat sy weer beheer oor haar emosies het. "Jy en Bernie en Rikki kry alles wat julle wil hê op 'n silwer skinkbord."

"Jy behoort met Mamma te praat. Sy sal jou help."

"Mamma is die een wat my gesê het ek moet self vir my studies

betaal. Sy dink verpleging is 'n vorm van bediendewerk." Hildemara skud haar kop. "Ek kan haar vir niks vra nie, Clotilde. Bernie het nog twee jaar op kollege. Jy moet na die Otis Art Institute gaan en Rikki sal oor 'n paar jaar San Francisco toe gaan. Pappa en Mamma het ook nie geld soos bossies nie. Ek kan Mamma vir niks vra nie."

"Wat sê Mamma nou weer? Wie nie waag nie, sal nie wen nie."

"Ek sal dit waag om Oakland toe te gaan en bid dat die Here die res van die geld voorsien wat ek nodig het." Sy wil nie vir Mamma vra terwyl sy weet die antwoord gaan nee wees nie.

"Jy is hardkoppiger as sy." Cloe drink haar koeldrank klaar en loop.

Die nag voordat sy haar diploma ontvang, kom Hildemara doodmoeg en neerslagtig by die huis. Dalk kan sy die seremonie los en haar diploma later gaan afhaal. Sy kan sê dat sy siek was. Dit sal lekker wees om die hele dag te kan slaap, maar Mamma sal dit nie toelaat nie.

Toe sy by die agterdeur inkom, sien sy 'n blou organzarok aan die voet van haar bed hang. Cloe kom in van die kombuis. "Dis vir môre. Wat dink jy daarvan?"

Hildemara laat val haar boeksak en druk haar kneukels teen haar bewende mond.

Cloe stoot haar dieper die kamer in. "Kom. Pas dit aan. Ek kan nie wag om te sien hoe jy daarin lyk nie."

"Waar het jy dit gekry?"

"Waar dink jy? Ek het dit gemaak!" Sy begin Hildie se trui uittrek. "Ek het nog nooit so hard aan enigiets gewerk nie." Hildemara is skaars uit haar skoolrok voordat Cloe die nuwe oor haar kop getrek het en dit regtrek. Sy knyp die een kant en dan die ander. "As dit net 'n bietjie ingevat word, gaan dit perfek pas. Ons het dae lank gewerk!"

"Ons?"

"Mamma het die materiaal gekoop en ek het die rok ontwerp. Ons het dit so saam-saam aanmekaargesit. Niemand anders gaan so iets hê nie." Sy tree terug om haar werk te bewonder. "Dis ongelooflik!" Sy frons. "Wat makeer? Hoekom huil jy?"

Hildemara gaan sit op Rikki se bed, gryp haar skoolrok en probeer haar trane keer.

"Sê tog net jy hou daarvan." Cloe klink bekommerd.

Hildemara knik.

"Ek het geweet jy sou." Cloe klink weer soos haar selfversekerde self. "En ek het geweet dat jy 'n nuwe rok vir jou diplomaplegtigheid sou wil hê, maar dat jy eerder sal doodgaan as om te vra." Sy lag

gelukkig. “Jy het gesê die mense gaan nie onthou wat jy vyf minute na jou diploma gedra het nie, maar hulle sal hierdie rok onthou. En eendag sal jy kan sê dat jy Clotilde Waltert se eerste model was.”

Hildie lag en omhels haar.

Toe sy later vir Mamma probeer dankie sê, maak Mamma dit af met ’n gebaar. “Bernhard het ’n nuwe pak vir sy plegtigheid gekry. Jy het ’n rok nodig gehad. Ek wil nie hê mense moet sê dat ek nie ordentlik na my kinders kyk nie.”

Hildemara praat nie verder daaroor nie. Toe sy die rok die volgende dag aantrek, glimlag Pappa en knik goedkeurend. “Jy lyk pragtig.”

Hildie draai in die rondte. “Dis ’n pragtige rok.”

Pappa plaas sy hande op haar skouers. “Jý is pragtig. Ek en Mamma gaan so trots wees wanneer jy oor die verhoog stap en jou diploma ontvang. Jou ma het nooit die geleenthede gehad wat jy het nie, Hildemara. Haar pa het haar uit die skool gehaal toe sy twaalf was. Dis waarom dit vir haar so belangrik is dat haar kinders soveel opleiding moontlik kry.” Hy lig haar ken. “Moenie vir haar sê dat ek jou vertel het dat sy nooit hoërskool toe gegaan het nie. Dis ’n teer puntjie vir haar.”

“Mamma het die ekwivalent van ’n universiteitsgraad, Pappa. Sy praat vier tale en bied elke jaar ’n somerkamp aan. Ek het nog nie ’n antwoord van Merritt ontvang nie. Dalk gaan ek vir die res van my lewe by die Pitts werk en by die huis bly.” Dit sal haar ma beslis nie gelukkig maak nie.

“Jy gaan een van die dae jou antwoord hê, en ek is doodseker dit gaan die een wees waarvoor jy wag.” ’n Kar toet buite. Hy raak aan haar wang. “Jy beter gaan. Mamma wag om jou dorp toe te vat.”

Sy gee hom ’n drukkie. “Sy gaan Cloe en Rikki kom haal sodra sy my afgelaai het. Gaan Pappa dorp toe loop of later saam met Mamma ry?”

Hy gryns. “Ek ry. Here, behoede my. Ek wil nie my dogter se diplomaplegtigheid misloop nie.”

Mamma sê nie ’n woord op pad skool toe nie. Toe Hildemara weer probeer om haar vir die rok te bedank, sien sy hoe Mamma haar mond saampers en haar kop skud sonder om haar oë van die pad af te haal.

Toe Hildemara daardie aand in haar nuwe organzarok oor die verhoog stap en haar diploma ontvang, talm sy lank genoeg om na die see gesigte te kyk. Sy sien Mamma, Pappa, Clotilde en Rikka in die tweede ry. Pappa, Clotilde en Rikka klap hande. Mamma sit met haar hande op haar skoot gevou en kyk af. Hildie kan nie haar gesig sien

nie.

***

*Liewe Rosie*

*Hildemara Rose het vandag haar hoërskooldiploma ontvang. Toe sy oor die verhoog stap, was ek bang dat my trane haar in die verleentheid sou stel. Ek is so trots op haar! Hildemara is die eerste meisie aan my kant van die familie wat haar skoolloopbaan voltooi het.*

*As die Here wil en as ons 'n goeie oes het, sal sy Oakland toe gaan. Ek wou haar universiteit toe stuur, maar sy wil verpleegkunde studeer. Sy het nog steeds 'n diensbare hart. Sy droom daarvan om die volgende Florence Nightingale te wees. As die Samuel Merritt Hospital School for Nursing haar weier, sal ek die deure persoonlik met my kaal hande gaan afbreek.*

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"Daar is 'n brief vir jou op die tafel." Mamma knik na 'n koevert wat teen 'n fles vol rose staangemaak is.

Hildemara se hart mis 'n slag toe sy die adres agterop die koevert lees: *Samuel Merritt Hospital School of Nursing.*

Mamma kyk bo-oor haar bril waar sy besig is om een van Pappa se oorpakke reg te maak. "Jy sal nie weet wat daarin staan tensy jy dit oopmaak nie."

Hildemara se hande bewe toe sy 'n mes uit die laai haal en die koevert versigtig oopsny. Haar opgewondenheid taan terwyl sy lees. Mamma laat sak haar herstelwerk op haar skoot. "Wat is fout? Wil hulle jou nie hê nie?"

"Ek voldoen aan al die vereistes behalwe een: ek is nie agtien nie." Sy sal eers in Januarie agtien wees. Sy sal moet wag totdat die volgende jaar se klas die volgende herfs begin.

"Jy hoef nie agtien te wees om hiernatoe te gaan nie." Mamma haal nog 'n koevert uit haar roksak en hou dit uit. Dit is alreeds oopgemaak.

Hildemara lees die reliëfletters in die linkerhoek. "Die Universiteit van Kalifornië in Berkeley? Mamma, ek kan nie soontoe gaan nie."

"Hoekom nie?"

Hildemara wil huil van frustrasie. "Want ek is nog besig om vir my

verpleegopleiding te spaar!" Sy gooi die brief op die kombuistafel neer. "En buitendien, 'n universiteit is nie vir iemand soos ek nie." Sy baklei teen haar trane en draai om na die agterdeur toe.

Mamma gooi haar naaldwerk op die vloer neer en staan op. "Ek wil jou nooit weer so iets hoor sê nie! Ek sweer ek sal jou klap!" Sy gryp die brief wat op die tafel lê en hou dit onder Hildemara se neus. "Jy het die verstand! Jy het die punte! Hoekom kan jy nie gaan nie?"

Hildemara roep gefrustreerd uit. "Klasgelde én boeke én koshuisverblyf ... Ek het skaars genoeg gespaar om vir my uniform en 'n jaar se klasgeld te betaal. En dis waarheen ek wil gaan! Ná ses maande se opleiding sal ek deur die hospitaal betaal word. Ek sal elke sent moet spaar sodat ek vir my tweede en derde jaar kan betaal!"

Mamma hou die koevert op. "Dit is die Universiteit van Kalifornië in Berkeley, Hildemara!" Haar stem is hard van frustrasie. "'n *Universiteit!*"

Dis duidelik dat Mamma nie luister nie. "Dis een jaar, Mamma, en ek sal niks aan die einde daarvan oorhê nie."

"Niks nie? Wat bedoel jy *niks* nie? Jy sal een jaar aan een van die beste universiteite in die land hê!" Sy skud die koevert. "Dis meer werd as – " Sy bly stil en draai weg.

Hildemara pers haar lippe opmekaar om te keer dat sy huil. "Meer as drie jaar se verpleegopleiding, Mamma? Is dit wat Mamma wil sê?"

Mamma bal haar vuiste en slaan so hard op die kombuistafel dat dit wip. Dan sak haar skouers en sy vloek twee maal in Duits.

Vir eens deins Hildemara nie terug nie, maar sê wat sy dink. "Mamma laat Cloe en Rikki toe om hulle drome te droom, maar ek het nie die reg nie, of hoe? Maak nie saak hoe hard ek probeer nie, ek gaan nooit aan Mamma se verwagtings voldoen nie. En ek gee nie meer om nie. Ek wil 'n verpleegster wees, Mamma." Iets ontplof in Hildie en sy gil. "*'n Verpleegster!*"

Mamma vryf oor haar gesig en laat haar asem uit. "Ek weet, maar jy sal moet wag. En terwyl jy wag, kan jy na Berkeley toe gaan in plaas daarvan om jou tyd agter 'n toonbank te mors. Selfs een semester – "

"Die geld wat ek gespaar het, is vir verpleegopleiding."

"Dan sal ek jou stuur! Ek sal vir die jaar betaal!"

"Ek kan net dink hoeveel Mamma van daardie idee hou. Hou Mamma se geld! Spandeer dit op Cloe en Rikka. Die Otis Art Institute en die California School of Fine Arts gaan waarskynlik net soveel soos die universiteit kos. En Mamma het hulle belowe."

Mamma se oë blits gevaarlik. "Het jy al ooit daaraan gedink dat ek

jou sal help?"

"Dis nie asof Mamma aanbied om my te help nie! Mamma stuur my bloot waarheen *Mamma* wou gaan!" Die oomblik toe die woorde uit is, weet sy dat dit die waarheid is. Sy kan dit op Mamma se gesig sien.

Mamma gaan sit en laat sak haar gesig in haar hande. "Dalk is jy reg." Sy sug diep en sit haar arms op die tafel asof om haarself te staal.

Hildemara begin sê dat sy jammer is, maar keer haarself. Sy ervaar skielik 'n groot jammerte vir haar ma en trek 'n stoel uit. "Wat sou Mamma studeer het?"

"Enigiets. Alles." Sy lig haar hand asof sy 'n vlieg wegjaag. "Dit behoort tot die verlede." Sy pen Hildemara met haar blik vas. "Wat is jy van plan om vir die volgende jaar te doen?"

"Werk. Spaar."

Mamma se skouers hang. "Ek was harder met jou as met die ander omdat ek gedink het ek moes wees. Wel, jy het my uiteindelik teëgestaan. Dit kan ek jou ter ere nagee." Sy staan op en draai haar rug op Hildemara toe sy haar naaldwerk optel om verder aan Pappa se klere te werk.

* * *

Hildemara kry 'n beter werk by Wheeler's Truck Stop langs die hoofpad. Sy werk langer ure en kry goeie fooitjies. Wanneer sy huis toe kom, kry sy Mamma dikwels by die tafel besig om briewe te skryf. Soms maak sy aantekeninge in haar ou bruin leerjoernaal. "Hoe was jou dag?" vra sy sonder om op te kyk.

"Goed."

Dis asof hulle niks het om vir mekaar te sê nie.

Toe dit uiteindelik tyd word om te gaan, pak Hildemara die paar goed wat sy gaan nodig hê en koop haar treinkaartjie Oakland toe. Mamma maak bief Wellington vir ete. Hildemara sê dankie dat sy so 'n feesmaal maak voordat sy weggaan. Mamma trek haar skouers op. "Ons het dieselfde vir Bernhard gedoen."

Cloe spring op toe hulle klaar geëet het. "Bly net hier, Hildie!" Sy hardloop na die voorste slaapkamer toe en kom met 'n klomp toegedraaide geskenke terug. Sy sit hulle voor Hildie neer.

"En wat is dit dié?"

"Wat dink jy, vakie? Jou afskeidsgeskenke!" Clotilde glimlag en klap

hande toe sy gaan sit. "Maak myne eerste oop! Dis die grootste een."

"Nog 'n skepping deur Clotilde?" Hildemara snak na haar asem toe sy 'n vlootblou rok met wit mouboordjies en helderrooi knope uithaal. 'n Rooi gordel, rooi skoene en 'n rooi handsak lê onder in die boks.

"Jy gaan soos iets uit 'n tydskrif lyk!"

Pappa gee vir haar 'n klein, leergebinde Bybel met 'n rooi lint. "Elke keer wanneer jy dit lees, gaan dit wees asof ons hier saam in die woonkamer sit. Nes ons gedoen het vandat jy 'n klein dogtertjie was."

Hildemara loop om die tafel om hom op die wang te soen.

Bernie gee haar vyf dollar. "Dit moes vir jou diploma gewees het, maar eerder laat as nooit." Hy verkoop sy geënte suurlemoen- en lemmetjie- en lemoenbome aan 'n kwekery in Sacramento en sê hy verdien goeie geld. "Ek is van plan om 'n klein fortuintjie aan Elizabeth se verloofring te spandeer."

"Moenie jou suster se oomblik steel nie." Mamma knik na die twee laaste geskenke. "Jy het nog twee om oop te maak, Hildemara Rose."

By Rikki kry sy 'n geraamde skets van Mamma wat besig is om te brei en Pappa wat Bybel lees. Hildemara se oë word vol trane. "Eendag gaan ek vir jou 'n olieverfskildery daarvan maak, Hildie. As jy wil."

"Ek wil, net solank jy my nie vra om hierdie een terug te gee nie."

Die laaste geskenk is 'n klein kissie wat in bruinpapier toegedraai en met 'n rooi lint vasgestrik is. "Is hierdie een van Mamma af?"

"Moet wees, aangesien jy al die ander s'n oopgemaak het." Mamma se hande is styf voor haar gevou.

Hildemara kan nie 'n woord uitkry toe sy dit oopgemaak het nie.

"Dit is 'n sakhorlosie met 'n tweede wyser, soos dié wat hulle in 'n resies gebruik," sê Mamma vir die ander.

Hildie kyk deur haar trane na Mamma, steeds nie in staat om enigiets te sê nie. Sy wil haar arms om haar ma slaan. Sy wil haar soen.

Mamma staan skielik op. "Clotilde, ruim jy die bokse en geskenkpapier op. Rikka, jy kan vanaand help afdek."

Toe Hildie die volgende oggend opstaan, sê Pappa dat hy haar met die wa sal stasie toe neem. "Ek moet in elk geval ingaan vir voorraad."

"Waar is Mamma?" Sy wil met haar praat voordat sy weggaan.

"Sy slaap bietjie laat."

"Dis 'n eerste." Die toe kamerdeur lyk soos die muur van 'n fort.

Pappa staan by Hildie op die stasieplatform en wag totdat die fluitjie blaas en die kondukteur roep dat almal aan boord moet gaan.

Hy hou haar skouers stewig vas en soen haar op die wang. “Een van my.” Hy soen die ander. “Een van Mamma.” Dan tel hy haar tas op en gee dit vir haar, sy blou oë tranerig. “Die Here gaan saam met jou. Moenie vergeet om met Hom te praat nie.”

“Ek sal nie, Pappa.” Haar trane loop. “Maar ek het nie vir Mamma dankie gesê nie. Ek kon dit nie gisteraand sê nie.”

“Dit was nie nodig om enigiets te sê nie, Hildemara.” Sy stem is skor. Hy waai en begin loop. “Gaan nou, my kind. Maak ons trots!” roep hy oor sy skouer terwyl hy oor die stasieplatform loop.

Hildemara klim in die trein en kry ’n sitplek. Haar hart mis ’n slag toe die trein vorentoe ruk en dan glad oor die spore begin beweeg. Sy sien Pappa waar hy voor op die wa sit. Hy vee sy oë af en maak die leisels los. Toe die treinfluitjie blaas, lig Hildemara haar hand en waai, maar Pappa kyk nie om nie.

## Chapter 28

**1935**

Farrelly Home for Nurses stood on the grounds of Samuel Merritt Hospital. Hildie stood gazing up at the grand four-story, U-shaped brick building that would be her home for the next three years. Excitement pulsed through her as she asked directions to the dean of nursing's office.

Mrs. Kaufman stood a head taller and considerably broader than Hildemara. Her dark hair was cropped short. She wore a dark suit and white blouse and no jewelry. She greeted Hildemara with a firm handshake and handed over a pile of clothing. "This is your uniform, Miss Waltert. Laundry services are available. Do you have your laundry bag clearly marked with your name? You don't want anything lost. Remember to remove all jewelry, and no perfume." She explained that bracelets and rings carried bacteria, and perfume became cloying for patients in the already anesthetic-rich environment of a hospital.

"I'm glad you have short hair. Some girls complain bitterly about having to cut it, but short hair is more hygienic and easier to keep up without all the fuss and bother. Be sure to keep it above your collar. Do you have a pocket watch and fountain pen?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Keep both tucked in your apron pocket at all times. You'll need them." She picked up her phone. "Tell Miss Boutacoff her probie has arrived." She hung up. "*Probie* stands for probational student nurse. Each new student has a big sister to welcome her and answer any questions she may have."

Hildemara heard the squeal of rubber soles on linoleum outside the door and saw a flicker of irritation on Mrs. Kaufman's face. A tall, slender young woman stepped into the office. Curling black hair framed an impish face dominated by dark eyes and winged brows. "Miss Jasia Boutacoff, this is your little sister, Miss Hildemara Waltert. Please try to teach her good habits, Miss Boutacoff. You're dismissed." Mrs. Kaufman began to sort through a stack of papers on her desk.

Jasia led Hildemara down the hallway. "I'm to give you the grand tour. Orient you to your new surroundings." Her dark eyes sparkled. "Come on." She waved Hildie along. "Rule number one." She leaned in and whispered loudly. "Don't get on Kaufman's bad side. I was supposed to write you a welcome letter, but I've never been much for correspondence." She made a clicking sound with her tongue as

she winked.

Hildie had to take two steps to every one Jasia did.

"I remember my first day," Jasia reminisced. "I was scared to death. The General had me quaking in my boots."

"The General?"

"Kaufman. That's what we call her. Behind her back, of course. Anyway, I didn't meet my big sister until the second week. She forgot all about me. Oh, well. I had to learn all the ropes the hard way. By making mistakes. Plenty of them. I didn't endear myself to the General. I'm counting the days until I have my certification and I can depart the nether regions of Farrelly Hall. If I'm lucky, I'll be hired as a private duty nurse by some lonely, wealthy old man with one foot in the grave and another on a banana peel." She laughed. "You should see your face, Waltert. I'm kidding!"

Jasia took the stairs two at a time. Hildie raced after her. "We'll start at the top and work our way down. Call me Boots, by the way, but never in front of the General. She'll skin you alive. We're supposed to call one another Miss So-and-so. All very prim and proper. Come on! Keep up! This is going to be a whirlwind tour!" She laughed again. "You're puffing like a steam engine."

Boots took Hildemara from a large auditorium to a reception room to the library, kitchenette, two classrooms, and a dietetic laboratory. Hildie ran to keep up, wondering if everything would go like this. The second floor held a nurses' dormitory; the third, an open-air sleeping porch with cot beds and another auditorium.

"People are coming and going at all hours up here, but you'll get used to it. It'll be a while before you'll move up here anyway, if you make it through probation. The first six months, everyone on staff will try their best to wash you out, and anyone lacking in stamina and dedication goes! You look a little thin. You'd better get some meat on those bones. Oh, and I forgot to tell you: you can use the radio and piano. Do you play? No? Drat! We need someone around here to start up a glee club."

Boots pointed this way and that as they rushed along.

"There's a sewing machine in there. The shelves contain a fiction library. Two hundred books, but you're not going to have any time to read even one of them. A magazine in the bathroom, maybe. What a slowpoke. Come on! Let's move, Waltert!" She laughed easily, not winded at all. "You're going to have to learn to fly if you want to be a good nurse." She went down the stairs quickly, head high, not even

holding the rail. In awe, Hildemara followed at a safer pace.

Boots waited at the bottom. She whispered, "As you already know, the General is on the first floor, guarding the gates to the outside world." She pointed. "She has a helper, Mrs. Bishop." She pointed to another office door. "Bishop's a peach. If you're late, she'll sneak you in. But be careful. We don't want to get her fired. Come on. Down we go into Probie Alley, or the Dungeon as I call it."

The corridor bustled with new students finding their bearings.

"You'll be down here in the gloom for six months, with a roommate, hopefully more fun than mine." She shuddered dramatically. "Do whoever she is a big favor and keep everything put away. There's barely space to change your mind in these cells, let alone your clothes." Her shoes squeaked to a halt. "Here's where I dump you. This humble abode is your new home! Enjoy!" She waved her hand airily.

Hildie peered in at a room with two narrow beds and two tiny dressers.

"Oh, before I forget, the most important room in the building—the communal bathroom—is just down the hall on the right, and on the left farther down is the itsy-bitsy kitchenette you'll have to share with twenty classmates. Of course, there'll be fewer by the end of the month."

With that encouragement, Boots glanced at her pocket watch and squealed. "Holy Godfrey! I've gotta run! Duty in fifteen minutes! Cute doctor." She raised her eyebrows up and down. "See ya!" She ran for the stairs. Her shoes squealed again. "Let me know if you have any questions or problems!" Her voice echoed in the corridor. Girls stuck their heads out doors to see who was making all the noise, but Boots had already bounded up the stairs.

Laughing under her breath, Hildemara entered her new home. It wasn't any smaller than the room she had shared with Cloe and Rikka. And here she'd have only one roommate.

Smiling, she unpacked her blue dress with the white cuffs, red shoes, purse, and belt and put them in the bottom dresser drawer. She put two other dresses in the second drawer, along with her extra underwear. Unfolding the clothes Mrs. Kaufman had handed over, she admired the blue- and white-striped dress with puff sleeves. A pair of stiff-starched removable cuffs and a collar lay between the folds. A full white apron, long white silk stockings, and thick-soled white oxford shoes finished the ensemble. Hildie ran her hands over the garments,

heart swelling with pride. No nursing cap, not yet. She would have to earn that. But even so, she couldn't wait to wear the uniform tomorrow for her first morning orientation class.

Keely Sullivan, a redheaded, freckle-faced girl from Nevada, came in an hour later and unpacked her things. Over the next few hours, Hildie met Tillie Rapp, Charmain Fortier, Agatha Martin, and Carol Waller. They all crowded into the room to share how and why they had decided to become nursing students. Tillie, like Hildemara, had dreamed of becoming the next Florence Nightingale, while Agatha wanted to marry a rich doctor. "You can have doctors," Charmain said, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. "My father's a doctor. Give me a farmer any day. Farmers stay home!"

"Farmers are boring!"

"Excuse me?" Hildemara pretended offense. "My brother's a farmer. Six feet two; blond; blue-eyed; football, basketball, and baseball star of our high school. He's a senior in college now."

Charmain's eyes shone. "When do I get to meet him?"

"Maybe I'll take you to his wedding. He's marrying my best friend."

Everyone laughed. They talked through dinner in the cafeteria and went on talking long after dark, too excited to go to bed. "Lights out, ladies!" Bishop called from the end of the hall. "It's going to be an early morning!"

Sometime after midnight, the last girl crept out of Hildemara and Keely's room. Hildemara put her hands behind her head and smiled in the dark. For the first time in her life, she felt completely, utterly at home.

* * *

Everything moved fast the first few months. Up at five in the morning, Hildie lined up for a shower and time at the mirror or sink. She had to be at the hospital by six thirty, ready for uniform inspection at seven. After that, she helped deliver breakfast trays to patients and had lessons in how to properly make a bed: sheets folded in square corners and tucked tight enough to bounce a quarter.

Hildemara and the others followed the General like ducklings down the hospital corridors, pausing as she introduced "our new probies" to patients and then demonstrated various skills they needed to learn over the next few weeks: taking and charting temperatures and pulse rates, changing bandages, doing bed baths and massages. Hildemara got her first sight of a naked man and felt her face go hot.

Mrs. Kaufman leaned close as Hildie filed out the door with the other student nurses. "You'll get over being embarrassed about anything soon enough, Miss Waltert."

By the end of the week, Hildemara received her ward assignment and reported to the registered nurse who would continue her training and then wrote a daily progress report for Mrs. Kaufman. Just when she felt she had built some kind of rapport with one registered nurse, Hildie found herself reassigned to another.

After lunch in the cafeteria, Hildemara attended class lectures conducted by the General or various doctors: ethics, anatomy, and bacteriology to start, adding nursing history, materia medica, and dietetics later. She felt the hot breath of the General on her neck frequently and feared being culled.

"It's not called Hell Month for nothing." Boots lifted her mug of hot chocolate in salute. "Congratulations on making it through." Though they addressed one another properly during duty hours and in class, Boots was Boots anywhere else. She made up nicknames for everyone. Tillie became Dimples; Charmain was Betty Boop; Keely became Red. Agatha with her impressive bosom became Pidge. She dubbed Hildie Flo for Florence Nightingale.

The days didn't get easier, but Hildemara fell into the routine: up before dawn, shower, dress, breakfast, songs and prayers in the rec room chapel, uniform inspection, four hours of ward duty, half an hour lunch break in the cafeteria—sometimes all of it standing in line, which meant going hungry—four more hours on duty, thorough shower and shampoo to disinfect herself before dinner, classes until nine, study until eleven, fall into bed in time for Bishop's "Lights out, ladies!"

She prayed constantly. *God, help me through this. God, don't let me blush and embarrass this young man while giving him a sponge bath. God, help me pass this test. God, don't let me be culled! I'd rather kill myself than go home with my tail tucked between my legs and my dreams in tatters! Please, please, please, Lord, help!*

"Miss Sullivan!" The General's voice boomed from the hallway. "Where do you think you're going at this hour of the night?"

A muffled response. Hildemara had barely looked up from her book while Keely got herself dolled up for a date with some young doctor in training.

"Probies do not date, Miss Sullivan! Get your mind off men and onto nursing." More muffled words from Keely. "I don't care if you

have a date with the apostle Paul! If you leave this residence without permission, take your possessions with you because you won't be allowed back in. Do you hear me?"

Everybody in Probie Alley heard the General.

Keely came back into the room, slammed the door, and sank onto the bed in tears. "I'm so sick of her snoopervising. I had a date with Atwood tonight."

"Atwood?"

"He's that cute intern on the obstetrics ward we've all been swooning over. Well, everyone but you, I guess. He's going to think I stood him up!"

"Explain to him tomorrow." Too tired to care, Hildemara put her book on her dresser, rolled over, and fell asleep dreaming of sutures, knives, instruments, and a frustrated doctor standing over an unconscious patient and shouting at her, "He's not even shaved and prepped!"

Every waking moment, she worked and reviewed details on how to do throat irrigations, barium enemas, Murphy drips, and concise and acceptable case reports. Boots called her a workhorse. "You look pale, Flo. What did I tell you about getting some meat on your bones? Ease up a little or you're going to end up sick." She slung an arm around Hildie's shoulders as they walked to the hospital.

* * *

"Miss Waltert," the General breathed into her ear. Hildemara's head snapped up and heat flooded her face, but no one laughed. Everyone sat in some state of exhaustion, trying to keep her eyes open and listen to Dr. Herod Bria's history of medicine. His monotone voice droned on and on. Hildie glanced surreptitiously at her pocket watch and groaned inwardly. Quarter past nine. Old Bria should have finished his torturous, meandering lecture fifteen minutes ago, and he was still going strong, referring to a pile of notes still to go through.

A soft yelp sounded behind her as the General pinched Keely. The sound made Dr. Bria look at the clock on the wall instead of his mound of notes. "That's all for this evening, ladies. My apologies for going over time. Thank you for your attention."

Everyone made a rush for the door, crowding through. Boots, a night owl, was waiting in Hildemara's room to see how her day had gone. Hildie sighed and nudged her over so she could sprawl on her bed. "And to think, I used to love nursing history."

Keely grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste. "That old geezer

loves to hear himself talk!" She disappeared out the door.

Boots gave Hildie a catlike smile and purred. "Perhaps our beloved Dr. Bria needs a lesson in punctuality."

The next evening, while Hildemara struggled to stay awake and attentive, Dr. Bria lectured until an alarm went off so loudly all the students jumped in their seats. The tinny-sounding bell continued to jingle as the General stormed across the room, yanked the sheet cover off John Bones, the dangling human skeleton, and tried to pry the clock from its pelvis. Bones clacked and clattered as the skeleton danced.

Mouths twitched, muscles ached with control, but no one laughed when the General held up the clock and snarled, "Who did this?" They all looked around and shook their heads. The General marched up one aisle and down the other, studying each face for signs of guilt.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Bria. Such rudeness . . ."

"It's all right, Mrs. Kaufman. It *is* nine o'clock."

Mrs. Kaufman dismissed the class and stood at the door, surveying each girl as she slipped by. Hildie hurried downstairs and ran along Probie Alley, her rubber-soled shoes squealing to a stop at her door.

Boots was lounging on her bed. "Ah. Class let out on time tonight." She laughed.

"*You* did it."

She gave Hildie a look of wounded surprise. "Would I do such a thing?"

Hildemara closed the door quickly before giggling. "I don't know anyone else around here that would play a prank like that."

Keely ducked in and closed the door quickly. "*Shhhh.* The General is standing at the foot of the stairs."

Boots sighed. "Oh, boy. My goose is cooked."

They were surprised to hear a deep belly laugh. It faded quickly, as though someone was heading upstairs at a run.

"Well, what do you know?" Boots drawled. "And here I thought the General's face would crack if she ever smiled."

* * *

"It's fine to have compassion, Miss Waltert, but you must keep a professional detachment." Mrs. Standish stood outside the closed door of a patient's room. "You won't last otherwise." She squeezed Hildie's arm and walked away.

Even Boots warned her not to become too attached. “Some will die, Flo, and if you let yourself become too close, you’ll break your heart over and over. You can’t be a good nurse that way, honey.”

Hildemara tried to keep a distance, but she knew her patients had other needs beside physical, especially those who had been in the hospital for longer than a week and had no visitors. She felt Mr. Franklin’s hot glare as she changed his soiled sheets. “Fine way to treat an old man. Load him up with castor oil and then fence him in.”

“It was that or leave your plumbing stopped up.”

Surprisingly, he laughed. “Well, from where I sit, you got the raw end of this deal.”

Boots worked a ward with her. “Check on Mr. Howard in 2B, Flo. He’s a cotton picker, always at his dressings.” From there, Boots sent her to check vitals on Mr. Littlefield. “Cheer him up. He’s got his feet braced against getting well.” When Hildie came on duty the next morning, Boots told her she had to report to a private room patient. “He’s been here a week. Another face might cheer him up.”

“What’s his story?”

“He’s a doctor, and he doesn’t like hospital rules.”

Hildie’s mouth fell open when she found her patient standing buck naked at the window, grunting and swearing as he tried to pry it open. “Can I help you, Dr. Turner?”

“How does a man get some air in here?”

“The nurse opens the window as soon as the patient gets back in bed.” She stepped by him and managed to pull the window up a few inches. “How’s that?”

After checking his vitals and writing on his chart, she went out for his lunch tray.

“Meat loaf!” He groaned loudly. “What I wouldn’t do for a steak and potatoes!”

When she returned for his tray, she found peanut shells all over the floor and a half-filled bag in his side table. She swept them up while he napped.

The next morning, she gave him a bed bath and changed the sheets. He clung to the railing. “Are you trying to topple me right out on my head?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

He laughed over his shoulder. “I’ll be more cooperative tomorrow.”

And he was. He sat in his flimsy hospital gown, his ankle on his

knee, while Hildie hurriedly stripped his bed.

"What is going on, Miss Waltert?" The General stood in the doorway. Dr. Turner's foot slapped down on the floor. "Is this how you make a bed? By having a poor, sick patient sit in a breeze?"

"It's the way he wanted it, ma'am."

"Well, he doesn't have a say. We don't want you to get pneumonia, Dr. Turner, now, do we? Get back in bed!" She glowered at Hildie as she marched out the door. "I'll be back in a few minutes to inspect."

Hildemara rolled Dr. Turner from one side to another as she pulled the sheets taut and tucked them in firmly. By the time Mrs. Kaufman returned, Dr. Turner lay on his back, hands folded on his chest like a corpse in a coffin, and an all-too-lively twinkle in his eyes, which he closed when the General came close.

"Very good, Miss Waltert. Good day, Dr. Turner." As she swished out the door, Hildie breathed again.

"Check the hall," Dr. Turner whispered. "Tell me when she's gone."

Peering out, Hildie watched the General stride down the hallway, pause briefly at the nurses' station, and head for the stairs. "She's gone." She heard a mighty thrashing sound and turned. "What are you doing?"

Dr. Turner kicked until all the bed linens she had carefully tucked in came free. "Ahhh. Much, much better." He grinned at her.

She wanted to smother him with his pillow or beat him over the head with the sack of peanuts someone had smuggled in. "They should have a special ward for doctors! One with manacles!" She heard his laughter as she went down the hall.

"Doc is gone. You can have Miss Fullbright now. She's down the hall on the left." Another private room patient who didn't seem sick at all. Hildemara carried in her meal trays and drew water in a tub. Miss Fullbright took her time and bathed unaided each morning while Hildie made the bed with fresh linens. The woman read incessantly while a radio played classical music on her side table. The only medicine dispensed was one aspirin a day, a child's dose.

On the fifth day, Hildie found her dressed and packing her suitcase. "I'm so glad your tests all turned out well, Miss Fullbright."

"Tests?" She laughed. "Oh, that." She folded a silk dressing gown into her suitcase. "Just routine stuff, no real complaint. I'm as healthy as a workhorse." She chuckled. "Don't look so surprised. I'm a nurse,

too. A head nurse, in fact. Not in this hospital, of course. I'd have no privacy whatsoever." She handed Hildie three novels. "You can put these in the nurses' library. I'm done with them." She smiled. "It's simple, Miss Waltert. I work hard all year, overseeing a staff of nursing students just like you. I need to get away and have a little vacation now and then. So every few years, I call my friend and sign in here for a week, have a routine checkup and a good rest with room service while I'm about it."

*Room service?* Hildie thought of Mama's comment about nurses being nothing more than servants.

"None of my friends know where I am, and I get to read for pleasure." She closed her case and snapped the locks.

"Don't forget your radio."

"It belongs to my friend. She'll pick it up later." Miss Fullbright slid her suitcase off the bed and held it easily at her side. "You were very efficient, Miss Waltert. Henny will be pleased with my report."

"Henny?"

"Heneka and I go way back." She leaned closer and whispered. "I think you and the other probies call her the General." Laughing, she walked out the door.

# Hoofstuk 28

## 1935

Die Farrelly Home for Nurses staan op die terrein van die Samuel Merritt Hospitaal. Hildie kyk op na die groot vierverdieping, U-vormige baksteengebou waar sy die volgende drie jaar gaan bly. Die opgewondenheid pols deur haar toe sy die aanwysings na die dekaan se kantoor vra.

Mevrou Kaufman is ’n kop langer en aansienlik breër as Hildemara. Haar donker hare is kort gesny. Sy dra ’n donker pak en wit bloesie en geen grimering nie. Sy groet Hildemara met ’n ferm handdruk en gee haar ’n armvol klere. “Dit is jou uniform, juffrou Waltert. Ons het ’n wassery. Het jy ’n wasgoedsak wat duidelik met jou naam gemerk is? Jy wil nie hê enigiets moet wegraak nie. Onthou, ons dra nie juwele of parfuum nie.” Sy verduidelik dat armbande en ringe draers van bakterieë is, en dat pasiënte kan naar word van die soet geur van parfuum.

“Ek is bly dat jy kort hare het. Sommige meisies kla vreeslik omdat dit gesny moet word, maar kort hare is meer higiënies en makliker om te versorg. Maak seker dat jy dit bokant die kraag hou. Het jy ’n sakhorlosie en ’n inkpen?”

“Ja, Mevrou.”

“Hou albei te alle tye in jou voorskootsak. Jy gaan dit nodig kry.” Sy tel haar telefoon op. “Sê vir juffrou Boutacoff haar proefie is hier.” Sy lui af. “*Proefie* staan vir leerlingverpleegster in haar proeftydperk. Elke nuwe student het ’n groot suster om haar te verwelkom en al haar vrae te beantwoord.”

Hildemara hoor die knarsing van rubbersole op linoleum buite die deur en sien ’n flikkering van irritasie oor mevrou Kaufman se gesig. ’n Lang, skraal jong vrou verskyn in die deur. Donker krulle omraam ’n ondeunde gesiggie met donker oë en geboogde wenkbroue. “Juffrou Jasia Boutacoff, dit is jou proefie, juffrou Hildemara Waltert. Probeer

asseblief om 'n goeie voorbeeld te stel, juffrou Boutacoff. Julle mag maar gaan." Mevrou Kaufman wend haar na die stapel papiere op haar lessenaar.

Jasia lei Hildemara in die gang af. "Ek is veronderstel om jou op 'n toer te neem. Jou met jou nuwe omgewing bekend te maak." Haar donker oë skitter. "Kom." Sy wuif Hildie saam. "Reël nommer een." Sy leun oor en fluister hard. "Moenie in Kaufman se verkeerde boekies kom nie. Ek was veronderstel om 'n verwelkomingsbrief aan jou te skryf, maar ek was nog nooit vreeslik goed met korrespondensie nie." Sy klik met haar tong en knipoog.

Hildie moet twee tree vir elkeen van Jasia s'n gee.

"Ek onthou my eerste dag." Jasia dink terug. "Ek was doodbang. Die Generaal het my die bewerasies gegee."

"Die Generaal?"

"Kaufman. Dis wat ons haar noem. Agter haar rug, natuurlik. In elk geval, ek het my groot suster eers in my tweede week ontmoet. Sy het van my vergeet. Ag, nou ja. Ek moes op die harde manier leer hoe alles werk. Deur foute te maak. Baie van hulle. Ek het myself nie by die Generaal bemind gemaak nie. Ek tel die dae totdat ek my sertifikaat ontvang en die onderwêreld van Farrelly Hall vir altyd kan verlaat. As ek gelukkig is, is daar 'n eensame, ryk ou omie met een voet in die graf en die ander op 'n piesangskil wat my aanstel." Sy lag. "Jy moet jou gesig sien, Waltert! Dis net 'n grappie!"

Jasia klim die trappies twee-twee uit. Hildie draf agter haar aan. "Ons begin bo en werk ondertoe. Terloops, noem my Boots, maar nooit voor die Generaal nie. Sy sal jou lewendig afslag. Ons is veronderstel om mekaar juffrou So-en-so te noem. Alles baie preuts en sedig. Kom! Jy moet byhou! Dit gaan 'n blitstoer wees!" Sy lag weer. "Jy blaas soos 'n stoomenjin."

Boots neem Hildemara van 'n groot ouditorium na 'n ontvangskamer na die biblioteek, kombuisie, twee klaskamers, 'n dieetkunde-laboratorium. Hildie hardloop om by te bly en wonder of dit die hele tyd so sal gaan. Die tweede vloer bestaan uit 'n slaapsaal, die derde uit 'n opelug slaapstoep met opklapbeddens en nog 'n ouditorium.

"Daar's gedurig 'n gekom en gaan op die stoep, maar 'n mens raak dit gewoond. Dit sal in elk geval 'n rukkie wees voordat jy hier uitkom, as jy die proeftydperk slaag. Gedurende die eerste ses maande probeer die personeel hulle bes om jou te laat uitsak, en enigiemand wat nie die stamina en toewyding het nie, word uitgeskop. Jy lyk 'n

bietjie maer. Ons sal jou moet vet voer. O, ek het vergeet om jou te sê: Die radio en klavier is ook tot ons beskikking. Speel jy? Nee? Vervlaks! Ons het iemand hier nodig om ’n sanggroep te stig.”

Boots beduie kruis en dwars terwyl hulle deur gange voortspoed.

“Hier is ’n naaimasjien en ’n fiksie-biblioteek met 200 boeke, maar jy gaan nie tyd hê om enigeen van hulle te lees nie. Dalk ’n tydskrif in die badkamer. Kom, beweeg, Waltert! Moenie staan en slaap nie.” Sy lag maklik en is glad nie uitasem nie. “Jy gaan moet leer om te vlieg as jy ’n goeie verpleegster wil word.” Sy draf die trappies af sonder om af te kyk of aan die reling vas te hou. Hildemara volg teen ’n veiliger pas.

Boots wag onder vir haar. Sy fluister: “Soos jy reeds weet, is die Generaal op die eerste vloer van waar sy die poorte na die buitewêreld bewaak.” Sy wys. “Sy het ’n helper, mevrou Bishop.” Sy wys na ’n ander kantoordeur. “Bishop is ’n skat. As jy laat is, sal sy jou help insluip. Maar wees versigtig. Ons wil haar nie afgedank hê nie. Kom. Nou is dit ondertoe na die Proefie-gang, of die kerker soos wat ek dit noem.”

Die gang wemel van nuwe studente wat met ’n groot lawaai besig is om nes te skop.

“Jy gaan vir ses maande hier bly en ek hoop jou kamermaat is meer pret as wat myne was.” Sy ril dramaties. “Wie sy ook al is, doen haar ’n groot guns en moet niks laat rondlê nie. Hierdie selle het skaars genoeg plek om te dink, wat nog te sê van aantrek.” Haar skoene knars tot stilstand. “Dis waar ek jou aflaai. Hierdie nederige woning is jou nuwe tuiste! Geniet dit!” Sy waai vrolik.

Hildie loer by ’n kamer in met twee smal bedjies en twee klein laaikassies.

“O, voor ek vergeet, die heel belangrikste kamer in die gebou – die gemeenskaplike badkamer – is net af in die gang aan die regterkant, en aan die linkerkant verder af is ’n piepklein kombuisie wat jy met 20 ander proefies deel. Aan die einde van die maand gaan julle natuurlik ’n paar minder wees.”

Met daardie aankondiging loer Boots met ’n gilletjie na haar sakhorlosie. “Gonnatjie Piet! Ek moet waai! Diensbeurt oor vyftien minute! Oulike dokter.” Haar wenkbroue wip op en af. “Sien jou!” Sy hardloop knarsend na die trappe toe. “Laat weet my as jy enige vrae of probleme het!” Haar stem weergalm deur die gang. Meisies steek hulle koppe by hulle kamers uit om te sien wie vir die geraas verantwoordelik is, maar Boots is alreeds met die trappe op.

Hildemara lag onderlangs en gaan by haar nuwe huis in. Dis nie kleiner as die kamer wat sy met Cloe en Rikka gedeel het nie. En hier gaan sy net een kamermaat hê.

Sy glimlag terwyl sy die blou rok met die wit boordjies, rooi skoene, handsak en gordel uitpak en hulle in die onderste laai bêre. Sy pak twee rokke in die tweede laai, saam met haar ekstra onderklere. Dan kyk sy bewonderend na die klere wat mevrou Kaufman haar gegee het: die blou- en-witgestreepte rok met pofmoue. ’n Paar gestyfde afhaalbare boordjies en kraag is binne-in toegevou. ’n Vol wit voorskoot, lang wit sykouse en wit diksoolskoene rond die uitrusting af. Hildie streel oor die klere en haar hart swel van trots. Daar is nog nie ’n verpleegsterskappie nie. Dié sal sy moet verdien. Maar sy kan nietemin nie wag om haar uniform vir haar eerste oriënteringsklas die volgende oggend aan te trek nie.

Keely Sullivan, ’n rooikop-sproetgesigmeisie van Nevada, maak ’n uur later haar opwagting en pak haar goed uit. Deur die loop van die volgende paar uur ontmoet Hildie vir Tillie Rapp, Charmain Fortier, Agatha Martin en Carol Waller. Later maak hulle vir almal plek in die kamer en begin gesels oor hoe en waarom hulle besluit het om verpleegsters te word. Tillie, nes Hildemara, droom daarvan om die volgende Florence Nightingale te word terwyl Agatha ’n ryk dokter wil aankeer. “Jy kan jou dokter kry,” sê Charmain waar sy met gevoude arms teen die deurkosyn staan. “My pa is ’n dokter. Ek sal enige tyd ’n boer vat. Boere bly by die huis!”

“Boere is vervelig!”

“Verskoon my?” Hildemara veins verontwaardiging. “My broer is ’n boer. Ses voet twee; blond met blou oë; die voetbal-, basketbal- en bofbalster van ons hoërskool. Hy is nou ’n senior op kollege.”

Charmain se oë blink. “Wanneer kom stel jy hom voor?”

“Dalk vat ek jou na sy troue toe. Hy trou met my beste vriendin.”

Almal lag. Hulle gesels al die pad kafeteria toe en terug, en tot lank na donker, te opgewonde om te gaan slaap. “Ligte uit, dames!” roep Bishop aan die onderpunt van die gang. “Dit gaan ’n vroeë oggend wees!”

Dis iewers ná twaalf toe die laaste meisie uit Hildemara en Keely se kamer sluip. Hildemara vou haar hande agter haar kop en glimlag in die donker. Vir die eerste keer in haar lewe voel sy volkome tuis.

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Gedurende die volgende paar maande gebeur alles vinnig. Nadat sy vyfuur soggens op is, moet sy haar beurt in die stort en ’n oomblik voor die spieël of wasbak afwag. Teen halfsewe moet sy by die hospitaal wees vir uniforminspeksie om sewe. Daarna help sy om die pasiënte se ontbyt te bedien en word sy geleer hoe om ’n bed behoorlik op te maak: lakens word in vierkantige hoeke gevou en so styf ingedruk dat ’n mens ’n bal daarop sou kon laat hop.

Hildemara en die ander volg die Generaal soos klein eendjies deur die hospitaalgange. Af en toe gaan staan hulle sodat sy “ons nuwe groentjies” aan die pasiënte kan voorstel en verskeie vaardighede kan demonstreer wat hulle deur die volgende paar weke moet aanleer: hoe ’n pasiënt se temperatuur en polsslag aangeteken word, hoe verbande geruil word, hoe ’n pasiënt gebad en masseer word. Toe Hildemara vir die eerste maal ’n kaal man sien, voel sy hoe haar wange warm word. Mevrou Kaufman leun nader toe sy saam met die ander leerlingverpleegsters uitloop. “Oor ’n klein rukkie sal jy oor niks meer skaam wees nie, juffrou Waltert.”

Teen die einde van die week ontvang Hildemara haar saal-opdrag en gaan rapporteer by die geregistreerde suster wat haar opleiding sal voortsit en ’n daaglikse vorderingsverslag vir mevrou Kaufman sal skryf. Net toe Hildie voel dat sy ’n soort verstandhouding met een suster bereik het, word sy aan ’n ander toegewys.

Na middagete in die kafeteria woon Hildemara klasse by wat deur die Generaal of verskeie dokters aangebied word: etiek, anatomie en bakteriologie wat later deur verplegingsgeskiedenis, materia medica en dieetkunde aangevul word. Sy voel die Generaal se warm asem gereeld in haar nek en vrees dat sy gaan uitval.

“Dit word nie verniet die Maand van Hel genoem nie.” Boots lig haar beker warm sjokolade in saluut. “Veels geluk dat jy dit gemaak het.” Alhoewel hulle mekaar behoorlik aanspreek wanneer hulle op diens is, word Boots andersins oral Boots genoem. En sy het vir elkeen ’n bynaam. Tillie word Dimpels; Charmain is Betty Boop; Keely word Red. Agatha met haar indrukwekkende boesem word Pidge. Sy noem Hildie sommer Flo vir Florence Nightingale.

Die dae word nie makliker nie, maar Hildemara raak gewoond aan die roetine: voordag opstaan, stort, aantrek, ontbyt, oggendgodsdiens in die kapel, uniforminspeksie, vier ure se saaldiens, ’n halfuur-ete – waarvan ’n mens soms die hele tyd in die ry staan en dus sonder kos bly – nog vier ure op diens, ’n deeglike stort en sjampoe om haarself voor aandete te ontsmet, weer klas tot nege, studie tot elf, en in die

bed neerval betyds vir Bishop se "Ligte uit, dames!"

Sy bid voortdurend. *Here, help my hierdeur. Here, gee dat ek nie bloos en hierdie jong man in die verleentheid stel wanneer ek hom was nie. Here, help my om hierdie toets te slaag. Here, gee asseblief dat ek nie sal uitval nie! Ek sal myself eerder doodmaak as om stert tussen die bene en met mislukte drome terug te gaan! Asseblief, asseblief, asseblief, Here, help!*

"Juffrou Sullivan!" bulder die Generaal se stem vanuit die portaal. "Waarheen is jy hierdie tyd van die nag op pad?"

'n Onduidelike antwoord. Hildemara het skaars van haar boek af opgekyk terwyl Keely haarself vir 'n afspraak met 'n jong mediese student opgedollie het.

"Proefies gaan nie uit nie, juffrou Sullivan! Vergeet van mans en konsentreer op verpleging." Keely sê nog iets onhoorbaars. "Ek gee nie om of die apostel Paulus jou uitgevra het nie! As jy sonder toestemming uitgaan, kan jy jou besittings maar saam met jou neem, want jy gaan nie weer hier toegelaat word nie. Hoor jy my?"

Elke proefie in die gang het die Generaal gehoor.

Keely kom terug kamer toe, slaan die deur toe en sak in trane neer op haar bed. "Ek is so siek vir haar neusinstekery. Ek het vanaand 'n afspraak met Atwood gehad."

"Atwood?"

"Hy's daai oulike student in obstetrie waarop ons almal beenaf is. Wel, almal behalwe jy. Hy gaan dink ek het hom verniet laat wag!"

"Jy kan môre vir hom verduidelik." Te moeg om om te gee, sit Hildemara haar boek op die kassie neer, draai om en droom van hegsteke, messe, instrumente en 'n gefrustreerde dokter wat langs 'n bewustelose pasiënt staan en vir haar skree: "Hy is nie eens geskeer of gereed vir die prosedure nie!"

Hildemara benut elke moontlike oomblik om te werk en hersiening te doen van wonddreinerings, barium enemas, 'n Murphy-drup en die opstel van bondige en aanvaarbare pasiëntverslae. Boots noem haar 'n werkesel. "Jy is bleek, Flo. Wat het ek jou gesê van 'n bietjie vleis aan jou bene? Jy gaan siek word as jy dit nie begin rustiger vat nie." Sy slaan 'n arm om Hildie se skouers terwyl hulle hospitaal toe loop.

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"Juffrou Waltert," adem die Generaal in haar oor. Hildemara se kop ruk op en haar gesig word warm, maar niemand lag nie. Almal

verkeer in ’n staat van uitputting waar hulle met swaar ooglede na dokter Herod Bria se geskiedenis van geneeskunde probeer luister. Sy eentonige stem dreun ononderbroke voort. Hildie kyk steels op haar sakhorlosie en kreun innerlik. Kwart oor nege. Ou Bria moes al ’n kwartier gelede met sy martelende, omslagtige lesing opgehou het, en hy is steeds goed op dreef, ’n hoop aantekeninge voor hom waarna nog verwys moet word.

Daar is ’n sagte gilletjie agter haar toe die Generaal vir Keely knyp. Die geluid laat dokter Bria na die muurhorlosie in plaas van sy aantekeninge kyk. “Dis al vir vanaand, dames. Ek maak verskoning dat ek bietjie oor die tyd gegaan het. Dankie vir julle aandag.”

Die studente stroom behoorlik by die deur uit. Boots, ’n naguil, sit in Hildemara se kamer en wag om te hoor hoe haar dag was. Hildie sug en beduie dat Boots moet plek maak sodat sy op haar bed kan neerval. “En om te dink ek was altyd gek oor geskiedenis.”

Keely gryp haar tandeborsel en tandepasta. “Daai ou langasem is mal daaroor om homself te hoor praat.”

Boots gee Hildie ’n katagtige glimlag en spin. “Dalk benodig ons geliefde dokter Bria ’n lessie in stiptelikheid.”

Terwyl Hildemara die volgende aand met moeite wakker bly terwyl dokter Bria met sy lesing besig is, gaan daar skielik so ’n harde alarm af dat al die studente op hulle stoele wip. Die blikkerige klank van die klok skel voort terwyl die Generaal deur die vertrek storm, die laken van John Bones, die menslike skelet, afruk en probeer om die wekker uit sy onderlyf te haal. Beendere klap en kletter soos die geraamte dans.

Monde vertrek en spiere werk, maar niemand lag toe die Generaal die horlosie voor haar hou nie. “Wie het dit gedoen?” blaf sy. Almal kyk rond en skud hulle koppe. Die Generaal marsjeer op en af tussen die rye en bestudeer elk gesig vir enige teken van skuld.

“Ek vra om verskoning, dokter Bria. Sulke ongeskiktheid ... ”

“Dis in die haak, mevrou Kaufman. Dit ís immers negeuur.”

Mevrou Kaufman verdaag die klas en staan by die deur om die meisies een-een deur te kyk. Hildemara draf ondertoe en kom met knarsende rubbersole voor haar deur tot stilstand.

Boots lê uitgetrek op haar bed. “Aa. Ek sien julle het vanaand betyds uitgekom.” Sy lag.

“Dit was jý!”

Sy kyk met seergemaakte verbasing na Hildie. “Sal ék ooit so iets doen?”

Hildemara maak die deur vinnig toe voordat sy begin giggel. "Ek ken niemand anders in hierdie gebou wat so iets sal doen nie."

Keely kom in en trek die deur vinnig toe. "*Sjuuuut*. Die Generaal staan onder by die trap."

Boots sug. "Ag, heiden. Dis klaarpraat met my."

Hulle is verbaas toe hulle iemand diep uit die maag hoor lag. Dit vervaag vinnig asof die persoon haastig met die trap opgaan.

"Wie sou nou kon raai?" kom dit van Boots. "En ek het nog altyd gedink die Generaal se gesig sal kraak as sy glimlag."

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"Dis goed en wel om deernis te hê, juffrou Waltert, maar jy moet 'n professionele afstand handhaaf." Mevrou Standish staan voor die toe deur van 'n pasiënt se kamer. "Andersins gaan jy dit nie maak nie." Sy gee Hildie se arm 'n drukkie en loop weg.

Selfs Boots waarsku dat sy nie te betrokke moet raak nie. "Sommige van ons pasiënte maak dit nie, Flo, en as jy te naby aan hulle kom, sal jou hart elke keer gebreek word. En dan is dit onmoontlik om 'n goeie verpleegster te wees."

Hildemara probeer 'n afstand handhaaf, maar sy weet haar pasiënte het meer as net fisiese behoeftes, veral dié wat langer as 'n week in die hospitaal is en geen besoekers het nie. Sy voel meneer Franklin se stormagtige kyk op haar terwyl sy sy vuil lakens afhaal. "Dis nou 'n manier om 'n ou man te behandel. Voer my 'n klomp kasterolie en kamp my in."

"Dit was dít of u moes verstop bly."

Tot haar verbasing begin hy lag. "Nou ja, van waar ek sit, het jy die slegste van hierdie affêre afgekom."

Boots deel 'n saal met haar. "Hou 'n ogie oor meneer Howard in 2B, Flo. Hy is gedurig besig om aan sy verbande te karring." Daarna stuur Boots haar om meneer Littlefield se lewenstekens na te gaan. "Beur hom op. Hy skop vas teen gesond word." Toe Hildie die volgende oggend aan diens kom, sê Boots dat sy by 'n pasiënt in 'n privaat kamer moet gaan aanmeld. "Hy is al 'n week hier. 'n Ander gesig gaan hom dalk opkikker."

"Wat is sy storie?"

"Hy's 'n dokter en hy hou nie van hospitaalreëls nie."

Hildie se mond val oop toe sy haar pasiënt poedelkaal voor sy

venster aantref waar hy swetsend en steunend probeer om dit oop te maak. “Kan ek u help, dokter Turner?”

“Wat moet ’n man doen om ’n bietjie vars lug te kry?”

“Die verpleegster maak die venster oop sodra die pasiënt in die bed klim.” Sy loop verby hom en slaag daarin om die venster ’n paar sentimeter op te skuif. “Is dit beter?” Nadat sy sy lewenstekens nagegaan en dit op sy kaart neergeskryf het, gaan haal sy sy middagete.

“Vleisbrood!” Hy kreun hardop. “Wat sal ek nie nou vir ’n biefstuk en aartappels gee nie!”

Toe sy sy skinkbord kom haal, is die vloer vol grondboontjiedoppe en lê daar ’n halwe sak op sy bedkassie. Sy vee hulle op terwyl hy ’n uiltjie knip.

Die volgende oggend gee sy hom ’n bedbad en trek sy bed skoon oor. Hy klou aan die reling vas. “Wil jy hê ek moet hier afduiwel?”

“Dis dalk nie so ’n slegte idee nie.”

Hy lag oor sy skouer. “Ek sal môre my samewerking gee.”

En hy doen dit ook. Hy sit in sy skamel hospitaaljurk met sy enkel oor sy knie, terwyl Hildie die lakens haastig van sy bed aftrek.

“Wat is hier aan die gang, juffrou Waltert?” Die Generaal staan in die deur. Dokter Turner se voet klap op die vloer neer. “Is dit hoe jy ’n bed opmaak? Deur ’n arme, siek pasiënt in ’n trek te laat sit?”

“Dis hoe hy dit wou hê, Mevrou.”

“Nou ja, hy het nie ’n sê nie. Ons wil nie hê u moet longontsteking kry nie, dokter Turner! Klim terug in die bed!” Sy gee Hildie ’n kwaai kyk toe sy by die deur uitmarsjeer. “Ek’s nou weer terug vir inspeksie.”

Hildemara draai dokter Turner van die een sy na die ander terwyl sy die lakens styf trek en hulle stewig invou. Teen die tyd dat mevrou Kaufman terugkom, lê dokter Turner soos ’n lyk op sy rug met sy hande op sy bors en ’n glinstering in sy oë. Dié word vinnig gesluit toe die Generaal naderkom.

“Baie goed, juffrou Waltert. Goeiedag, dokter Turner.” Hildie haal eers weer asem toe sy by die deur uit is.

“Gaan kyk gou in die gang,” fluister dokter Turner. “Kom sê my as sy weg is.”

Hildie loer om die deur en kyk hoe die Generaal in die gang afstap, ’n oomblik by die diensstasie vertoef en dan na die trappe toe mik. “Sy’s weg.” Sy hoor ’n harde gespook agter haar en draai om. “Wat maak u?”

Dokter Turner skop totdat al die lakens wat sy so versigtig ingevou het, losgekom het. “Aaa. Beter.” Hy grinnik vir haar.

Sy wil hom met sy kussing versmoor of hom oor die kop slaan met die sak grondboontjies wat iemand ingesmokkel het. “Hulle behoort ’n spesiale saal vir dokters te hê! Een met boeie!” Sy hoor hom lag terwyl sy in die gang afloop.

“Dok Turner is huis toe. Jy kan nou na juffrou Fullbright toe gaan. Sy is laer af in die gang aan jou linkerkant.” Nog ’n privaatkamerpasiënt wat glad nie lyk of sy siek is nie. Hildemara bring haar etes en tap vir haar ’n bad in. Juffrou Fullbright neem haar tyd en bad elke oggend sonder hulp terwyl Hildie haar bed skoon oortrek. Die vrou lees ononderbroke terwyl die radio langs haar bed klassieke musiek speel. Haar enigste medisyne is ’n aspirine ’n dag, ’n halwe dosis.

Toe Hildie die vyfde dag inkom, is sy aangetrek en besig om te pak. “Ek’s so bly dat u toetse almal goed uitgekom het, juffrou Fullbright.”

“Toetse?” Sy lag. “O, dit.” Sy pak ’n sykamerjas in haar tas. “Dis net ’n paar roetine-goedjies. Ek’s so sterk soos ’n os.” Sy gee ’n laggie. “Moenie so verbaas lyk nie. Ek’s ook ’n verpleegster. ’n Hoofsuster. Vanselfsprekend nie in hierdie hospitaal nie. Ek sou geen privaatheid gehad het nie.” Sy oorhandig drie boeke aan Hildie. “Jy kan dié in die verpleegstersbiblioteek gaan sit. Ek’s klaar met hulle.” Sy glimlag. “Dis eenvoudig, juffrou Waltert. Ek staan aan die hoof van ’n groep leerlingverpleegsters soos jy en werk heeljaar soos ’n slaaf. Ek moet af en toe wegkom en ’n bietjie rus. Elke paar jaar gee ek my vriendin ’n luitjie, kom vir ’n roetine-ondersoek, rus ’n bietjie en geniet die kamerbediening.

*Kamerbediening?* Hildie dink aan Mamma se opmerking, dat ’n verpleegster niks meer as ’n bediende is nie.

“Nie een van my vriende weet ek is hier nie, en ek kry kans om sommer vir die lekker te lees.” Sy maak haar tas toe en sluit die slotte met haar duime.

“Moenie u radio vergeet nie.”

“Dit is my vriendin s’n. Sy sal dit later kom kry.” Juffrou Fullbright tel haar tas van die bed af en staan gemaklik daarmee aan haar sy. “Jy was baie doeltreffend, juffrou Waltert. Henny sal tevrede wees met my verslag.”

“Henny?”

“Ek en Heneka kom al ’n lang pad saam.” Sy leun oor en fluister. “Ek dink jy en die ander proefies noem haar die Generaal.” Sy lag toe

sy by die deur uitgaan.

## Chapter 29

**1936**

The six-month probation period proved grueling and heartbreaking. Keely Sullivan got washed out when Mrs. Kaufman caught her sneaking out for another date. Charmain Fortier discovered she couldn't stand the sight of blood. Tillie Rapp decided to go home and marry her boyfriend. By the time the capping ceremony rolled around, only fifteen remained out of the twenty-two who had come with such high hopes. Mrs. Kaufman informed Hildemara that she would head the procession as the Lady with the Lamp, Florence Nightingale, the mother of nursing.

"I knew you'd do it, Flo!" Boots secured the plain white cap on Hildie's head and helped her with the coveted scarlet-lined navy blue cape with the red SMH insignia on the mandarin collar. "I'm proud of you!" She kissed her cheek. "Keep that lantern high."

The other nursing students had friends and family among the audience. "Where are your folks?" Boots looked around. "I want to meet that handsome brother of yours."

"They couldn't make it."

Everyone had a handy excuse. Mama said it would cost too much money to bring the whole family up by train. Papa had too much work to do to leave the farm. Mama had to make plans for Summer Bedlam again. The girls couldn't be bothered, and Bernie and Elizabeth were making wedding plans. This ceremony wasn't like a graduation, was it? It was just the end of probation, right? Nothing that mattered. Not to them, anyway.

Cloe wrote.

*The folks want to know when you're coming home. We miss you. We haven't seen you since Christmas.*

Hildemara wrote back.

*No one missed me enough to come to my capping ceremony. . . .*

Papa wrote a short note.

*Your words sting, Hildemara. Do you really judge us so harshly? Mama works hard. I can't leave the ranch. Come home when you can. We miss you.*

*Love, Papa*

Driven by guilt, Hildemara finally went home for a weekend. The last person she expected to meet her at the bus station in Murietta was Mama. She snapped a book closed and stood up when Hildie came

down the steps. “Well, well, so here’s the grand Lady with the Lamp.”

Was Mama being snide or condescending? “It was an honor, Mama, for being top in my class.” Hildie carried her suitcase to the car without looking back. Flinging the suitcase into the backseat, she climbed into the front, clenching her teeth and swearing to herself she wouldn’t say another word. Hurt and anger boiled up inside her, threatening to spill over and spoil the short time she had to visit.

Mama got in and started the car, saying nothing on the drive home. She turned in the driveway. Hildie broke the silence. “I see you have a new tractor.” Mama parked the car, the only sign she had heard Hildie a tightening of the muscles in her jaw. Hildie stepped out, grabbed her suitcase, and slammed the door. As she headed for the back door, she noticed other things she never had before. The house needed painting. The tear in the screen door had lengthened, letting flies in. The roof covering over the sleeping porch had been patched.

Cloe swung the door wide and came charging out. “Wait until you see our room!” The bunk bed had been replaced by two single beds covered with colorful quilts, a built-in, four-drawer dresser between them. On it stood a shiny brass kerosene lamp. Hildie had become so accustomed to electric lights that she’d forgotten the porch had never been wired. “What do you think? Isn’t it grand?”

After living in the pristine environment of Farrelly Hall and the polished corridors of the hospital, Hildemara noticed the unpainted, unfinished walls, the grimy woodwork, the sandy floor. She searched for something to say. “Who made the quilts?”

“I did. Mama bought the fabric, of course.”

“Of course.” It struck Hildie then. There was no room for her. “Where do I sleep?”

“On the living room sofa.” Mama walked past her. She paused at the back door to the kitchen. “Life doesn’t stand still, you know. Now that you have your own life, there’s no reason we can’t spread out a little and enjoy the extra space ourselves, is there? There’s no law against your sisters being as comfortable as you are in that grand brick building you wrote about.” The door slammed behind her.

Hildemara wished she had stayed in Oakland. Mama had managed to make her feel small and mean-spirited. “It’s lovely, Cloe.” She fought tears. “You did a beautiful job on those quilts.” Unlike the old one Hildemara had used, these covered the entire bed. Cloe and Rikki wouldn’t have to scrunch up to keep their feet warm. “Where’s

Papa?"

"Helping the Musashi boys. Their pump broke down again."

Gathering her courage, Hildie went into the living room and sat on the lumpy old sofa. Everything looked the same, but she saw it through the eyes of her bacteriology class. Everywhere she looked, Hildie saw places where colonies could flourish: a food stain on the sofa; scuffed woodwork; sandy grit tracked in from field and barn, undoubtedly rich with manure; linoleum peeling off in one corner of the kitchen; stacks of newspapers; the splattered, sun-bleached kitchen curtains; the cat sleeping in the middle of the kitchen table, where everyone ate.

If there was one thing Hildie had learned in the past few months, it was what people didn't know could hurt them.

Papa came in through the front door. "I saw Mama drive in." Hildie ran to him, hugging him tight. "Hildemara Rose." His voice rasped with emotion. "All grown-up." He smelled of horse manure, engine grease, dust, and healthy perspiration. Hildie cried at the pleasure of seeing his smiling face. "I've got to get back to work, but I wanted to welcome you home."

"I'll go with you." Hildie followed him across the street, waving hello to the Musashi girls working in the field. While Papa worked on the pump, she told him about her classes, patients, doctors, the girls.

He laughed over Boots's prank with John Bones. "You sound happy, Hildemara."

"Happier than I've ever been, Papa. I'm where God wants me."

"I'll be done here in a while. Why don't you go see about helping your mother?"

Mama brushed off her offer. "Just let me do it myself. I can get things done a lot faster."

Cloe had to study. Rikki had gone off somewhere to draw another picture. Bernie was in town with Elizabeth. Hildie sat on the sofa and read one of the old movie magazines Cloe collected. Several pages had been torn out. Hildie tossed it aside and looked at another. Same thing. Gathering up the old magazines, she took them out to the burn pile in the pit Bernie had dug last year. Cats wandered everywhere. Did they still live on mice in the barn? Or did Mama feed them excess milk from the cow she'd added to the menagerie?

Hildie went back inside to escape the heat. She missed the cool sea air that blew in across San Francisco Bay. She felt uncomfortable sitting in the living room while Mama worked in the kitchen, back

rigid, hands flying about her tasks. Hildie didn't know what to say. Silence and inactivity grated on her nerves. "I can set the table, can't I?"

"Please!"

Hildie opened the cabinet and took out the dinner plates. "This plate should be thrown away."

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

"It has a crack."

"So what?"

"Cracks are breeding grounds for germs, Mama."

"Put it back in the cabinet if it's not good enough for you."

Angry, Hildie took the plate out the back door and threw it into the garbage hole.

When she came back inside, Mama glared at her. "Are you happy now, Hildemara?"

"At least no one will get sick."

"We've been eating off that plate for ten years and no one's been sick yet!"

Bernie came home and hugged Hildemara. "Not staying for dinner, Mama. I'm taking Elizabeth to the movie." He leaned in toward Hildie. "Want to come with us?"

She was sorely tempted. "I'm only here for a couple days, Bernie. I'd like to spend it with the whole family. Tell Elizabeth I said hi. Maybe next time."

Everyone talked through dinner, except Mama. Cloe talked enough for two people and Rikki wanted to know about nurses' training. Hildie told them about the capping ceremony and her new uniform. She didn't say anything about being Lady with the Lamp or top of her class. She hoped Mama would say something, but she didn't.

She lay awake most of the night, staring at the ceiling. When she finally dozed off, Mama came into the kitchen and lit a lamp, keeping the wick low as she moved around on tiptoes, filling the coffeepot, making rolls, beating eggs. Papa came in, pulling up his suspenders. They whispered in German. Hildemara kept her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. As soon as they both finished breakfast, they went out to do chores. Nice that Mama let Cloe and Rikka sleep in. Hildie had never enjoyed that privilege.

Throwing on her clothes, Hildie started a fire in the woodstove and filled a big pot with water. She ate a roll and drank coffee while

she waited for the water to boil. Filling a pail with hot water, she took a bar of soap and a rag, got down on her hands and knees, and started scrubbing the linoleum.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mama stood behind her, a milk bucket in her hand.

"Helping, I hope." Hildie wrung brownish water from the rag. She'd have to scrub for a week to get this floor clean. She cringed at the thought of how many germs had been tracked in on Papa's work boots.

Mama sloshed milk as she slammed the bucket on the table. "We spent two days cleaning this house for your visit! I'm sorry it's not good enough for you!"

Hildie didn't know whether to apologize or thank her and decided neither would do any good.

"Is this what you learn in nurses' training? How to scrub floors?"

Scalded by Mama's scorn, Hildie sat back on her heels. "And bedpans, Mama. Don't forget about that."

"Get off your hands and knees!"

Hildie got up, grabbed the pail of filthy water, and went out the back door. She slammed the screen door behind her and threw the water over Mama's flower bed. Tossing the bucket aside, she went for a walk, a long walk down to Grand Junction, where she sat and watched the mesmerizing flow of water. How was it possible to love Mama and hate her at the same time?

When she went back, the house was empty. She found Papa in the barn sharpening a hoe. The scream of metal against stone matched Hildie's feelings. When he saw her, he stopped. "You didn't go to the movie with Mama and the girls."

"I wasn't invited."

He shook his head and set the hoe aside. "They wanted you to go."

"How would I know that, Papa?"

He frowned. "I'm sorry no one came to your capping ceremony, Hildemara. We'll come to your graduation."

Old Dash rose and barked as Mama's car turned in to the drive. Bernie sat behind the wheel, Cloe and Rikki shrieking with laughter as they pulled in. Everyone piled out. Even Mama had a smile on her face until she saw Hildie sitting on a bale of hay in the barn. "Where on earth did you go?"

"To Grand Junction."

“You missed a good show.” She headed for the house.

“I would’ve come if I’d been asked!”

“You would’ve been asked if you’d stayed at home.”

Papa let out his breath and shook his head.

Hildemara headed for the house. She had tidied up Cloe and Rikka’s bedroom earlier. When Hildie came in the back door, she lifted the hem of one of the quilts. “I made the bed with square corners. This is how we do it at the hospital. Everything stays tucked in this way. Looks nice and neat, doesn’t it?”

Rikki threw herself onto her bed and lounged with her arms behind her head. “Mama thinks you’re too high and mighty for us now.”

“Is that what she said?”

“She said you wouldn’t put a cracked plate on the table. She said you threw away one of her prettiest plates just because you didn’t think it was good enough for you to eat off of it.”

“I wouldn’t want anyone in the family eating off a cracked plate. Cracks are breeding grounds for germs.”

“What are germs, anyway?” Rikki shrugged.

“They’re living organisms so small you can’t see them, but they’re big enough to make you very, very sick. I’ve seen patients suffering with diarrhea, vomiting, fever, and chills. . . .”

“Be quiet!” Cloe hissed. “You’ve hurt Mama’s feelings enough.”

“And it never occurred to anyone that my feelings might be hurt when no one bothered to come to my capping ceremony?”

“It’s not like a graduation!”

“It was important to me.”

“You’ve done nothing but pick since you got home.”

“What are you talking about, Cloe?”

“Last night at dinner, you picked on Mama’s canning!”

There had been mold growing on the top of the quince jelly. When Hildie didn’t touch it, Mama wanted to know why it wasn’t her favorite anymore. Hildie told her. Mama had scraped it off and plunked it down on the table. “There. How’s that, Miss Nightingale?”

Hildie wanted to explain. “You’ve never seen people sick with food poisoning.”

Cloe glared. “As if Mama’s cooking would make anyone sick!”

Mama appeared in the doorway. “What are you two arguing about?”

“Nothing,” Hildie and Cloe said in unison.

“Well, keep *nothing* to yourselves!” She glared at Hildemara and went out the back door with a basket of laundry. Hildemara knew she had heard everything.

Hildie hardly spoke the rest of the time at home. She went to church with the family and sat with Elizabeth and Bernie. She walked home with Papa.

“You seem to have a lot on your mind, Hildemara.”

“Too much to talk about.”

“I know how that is.”

Mama drove Hildemara to the bus station. Hildie felt edgy with guilt. “I’m sorry, Mama. I didn’t mean to insult your cooking or your housekeeping or—”

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry; I’m sorry.” Mama put her foot down harder on the gas pedal.

Hildemara almost said she was sorry again, but bit her lip. “Old habits are hard to break.”

Mama let up on the gas. “The world is dirty, Hildemara Rose. It’s never going to be as clean and neat as you want it to be. You’ll have to find a way to live with that.”

Hildie sat up straight, blinking back tears, staring out the window as the vineyards and orchards flew by. She sat within two feet of her mother and felt a million miles between them.

Mama parked behind the bus station. She kept her hands on the steering wheel, the car idling roughly. “Will you be home for Easter?”

“Would you like me to come home?”

“What do you think?”

Hildie thought Mama would like it a whole lot better if she stayed in Oakland.

# Hoofstuk 29

## 1936

Die sesmaandeproeftydperk was uitmergelend en hartverskeurend. Keely Sullivan is uitgeskop toe mevrou Kaufman haar op ’n volgende nagtelike afspraak betrap het. Charmain Fortier het ontdek dat sy flou word as sy bloed sien. Tillie Rapp het besluit om huis toe te gaan en met haar kêrel te trou. Teen die tyd dat die studente hulle kappies ontvang, het daar net 15 van die 22 meisies oorgebly wat ’n semester gelede met sulke hoë verwagtings daar aangekom het. Mevrou Kaufman kom Hildemara inlig dat sy die prosessie as die Dame met die Lamp, Florence Nightingale, die moeder van verpleging, sal lei.

“Ek het geweet dit gaan jy wees, Flo!” Boots maak seker dat die wit kappie netjies sit en help Hildemara met die veelbegeerde, rooigevoerde vlootblou mantel met die SMH-kenteken op die mandarynkraag. “Ek’s trots op jou!” Sy soen haar op die wang. “Hou daardie lantern hoog.”

Die ander leerlingverpleegsters se vriende en familie sit in die gehoor. “Waar is jou ouers?” Boots kyk rond. “Ek wil daai aantreklike broer van jou ontmoet.”

“Hulle kon dit nie maak nie.”

Almal het ’n handige verskoning gehad. Mamma het gesê dit kos te veel vir die hele gesin om met die trein te kom. Pappa het te veel werk om van die plaas af weg te gaan. Mamma is besig met voorbereidings vir die somerkamp. Haar susters stel nie juis belang nie, en Bernie en Elizabeth is besig om hulle troue te reël. Hierdie seremonie is darem mos nie soos ’n gradeplegtigheid nie? Dis net die einde van haar proeftydperk, dan nie? Niks wat saak maak nie. Nie vir hulle nie, in elk geval.

Cloe skryf.

> *Die mense wil weet wanneer jy huis toe kom. Ons mis jou. Ons het jou Kersfees laas gesien.*

Hildemara skryf terug.

*Niemand het my genoeg gemis om na my kappie-seremonie toe te kom nie …*

Pappa skryf ’n kort briefie.

*Jou woorde maak seer, Hildemara. Oordeel jy ons regtig so hard? Mamma werk hard. Ek kan nie die plaas los nie. Kom huis toe wanneer jy kan. Ons mis jou.*
*Liefde, Pappa*

Dis merendeels uit skuldgevoel dat Hildemara uiteindelik vir ’n naweek huis toe gaan. Die laaste persoon wat sy met haar aankoms op die stasie in Murietta verwag het, is Mamma. Sy maak ’n boek toe en staan op toe Hildie met die trappies afkom. “Nou toe, hier is die Dame met die Lamp.”

Is Mamma smalend of neerbuigend? “Dit was ’n eer om eerste in my klas te staan, Mamma.” Hildie dra haar tas na die motor toe sonder om terug te kyk. Nadat sy die tas op die agtersitplek gegooi het, klim sy voor in. Sy byt op haar tande en belowe haarself dat sy nie ’n verdere woord gaan sê nie. Die woede en seer wat in haar opborrel, dreig om oor te kook en die kort tydjie saam met haar gesin te bederf.

Mamma klim in, skakel die enjin aan en hulle ry in doodse stilte huis toe. Dis Hildie wat die stilte verbreek toe hulle by die oprit indraai. “Ek sien julle het ’n nuwe trekker.” Mamma parkeer, die trekkie om haar mond die enigste teken dat sy gehoor het. Hildie klim uit, neem haar tas en klap die deur toe. Op pad na die agterdeur sien sy ander dinge wat sy nooit tevore raak gesien het nie. Die huis het verf nodig. Die skeur in die gaasdeur is langer en as’t ware ’n ope uitnodiging vir vlieë. Die dak oor die slaapstoep is slordig reggemaak.

Cloe gooi die deur oop en kom uitgestorm. “Wag totdat jy ons kamer sien!” Die stapelbed is vervang met twee enkelbeddens met kleurvolle kwilte, en daar is ’n ingeboude laaikas tussen hulle aangebring. Bo-op staan ’n blink, koper keroseenlamp. Hildie het so gewoond geraak aan elektriese ligte dat sy vergeet het die stoep is nooit bedraad nie. “Wat dink jy? Is dit nie mooi nie?”

Ná ’n paar maande in die statige Farrelly Hall en die gepoleerde gange van die hospitaal, merk Hildemara die ongeverfde, onafgewerkte mure, die aangepakte houtwerk, die sanderige vloer. Sy soek na iets om te sê. “Wie het die kwilte gemaak?”

“Ek het. Mamma het natuurlik die materiaal gekoop.”

“Natuurlik.” Dan tref dit Hildie. Daar is nie plek vir haar nie. “Waar

gaan ek slaap?”

“Op die bank in die woonkamer.” Mamma loop verby haar. Sy gaan staan by die agterdeur. “Die lewe staan nie stil nie, jy weet. Noudat jy jou eie lewe het, is daar seker geen rede waarom ons die ekstra spasie nie self kan geniet nie. Daar is geen wet wat sê dat jou susters nie net so gemaklik soos jy mag wees in daardie deftige baksteengebou waarvan jy skryf nie.” Die deur klap agter haar toe.

Hildemara wens sy het in Oakland gebly. Mamma het daarin geslaag om haar klein en gemeen te laat voel. “Dis lieflik, Cloe.” Sy baklei teen haar trane. “Jy het jouself met hierdie kwilte oortref.” Anders as die oue wat Hildemara gehad het, is die nuwes groot genoeg om die hele bed te bedek. Cloe en Rikki hoef nie hulle bene op te trek om hulle tone warm te hou nie. “Waar’s Pappa?”

“Hy het die Musashi-seuns gaan help. Hulle pomp het weer gebreek.”

Hildie skraap haar moed bymekaar en gaan sit op die bulterige bank in die woonkamer. Alles lyk dieselfde, maar sy sien dit deur die oë van ’n bakteriologie-student. Orals waar sy kyk, sien Hildemara plekke waar bakterieë kan floreer: ’n kosvlek op die bank; onafgewerkte houtwerk; sanderigheid op die vloer wat uit die land en skuur ingetrap is, ongetwyfeld ryk aan dieremis; die linoleum wat in die een hoek van die kombuis besig is om op te krul; stapels koerante; die oliebespatte, songebleikte kombuisgordyne; die kat wat in die middel van die kombuistafel lê en slaap waar almal eet.

As daar een ding is wat Hildie die afgelope paar maande geleer het, is dit dat wat mense nie weet nie, hulle kan siekmaak.

Pappa verskyn in die voordeur. “Ek het Mamma sien inry.” Hildie hardloop na hom toe en gooi haar arms om sy lyf. “Hildemara Rose.” Sy stem is skor van emosie. “Jy het grootgeword, my kind.” Hy ruik na perdemis, enjinghries, stof en gesonde sweet. Hildie huil toe sy in sy glimlaggende gesig opkyk. “Ek moet weer gaan werk, maar ek wou jou terugverwelkom.”

“Ek sal saam met Pappa gaan.” Hildie volg hom oor die straat en waai vir die Musashi-dogters waar hulle in die land besig is. Terwyl Pappa aan die pomp werk, vertel sy hom van haar klasse, pasiënte, dokters, die meisies.

Hy lag oor Boots se poets met John Bones. “Jy klink gelukkig, Hildemara.”

“Gelukkiger as wat ek al ooit was, Pappa. Ek is waar die Here my wil hê.”

“Ek gaan oor ’n rukkie klaar wees. Gaan hoor jy solank of jy nie jou ma kan help nie.”

Mamma wys haar aanbod van die hand. “Los, ek sal. Ek kry dinge baie vinniger gedoen.”

Cloe moet leer. Rikki het iewers heen verdwyn om te teken. Bernie is by Elizabeth in die dorp. Hildie gaan sit op die bank en lees een van die ou filmtydskrifte wat Cloe bymekaarmaak. ’n Hele paar bladsye is uitgeskeur. Hildie gooi dit eenkant toe en kyk na een van die ander. Nes die vorige. Nadat sy die ou tydskrifte opgetel het, neem sy hulle na die brandhoop in die put wat Bernie verlede jaar gegrawe het. Daar is oral rondloperkatte. Lewe hulle steeds van die muise in die skuur? Of gee Mamma hulle van die ekstra melk van die koei wat sy gekoop het?

Hildie gaan weer binnetoe om uit die hitte te kom. Sy mis die koel seelug wat oor die baai in San Francisco waai. Dit laat haar ongemaklik voel om in die woonkamer te sit terwyl Mamma met ’n regop rug en raakvathande in die kombuis werk. Hildie weet nie wat om te sê nie. Die stilte en passiwiteit werk op haar senuwees. “Ek kan seker tafel dek.”

“Asseblief!”

Hildie maak die kas oop en haal die borde uit. “Hierdie bord moet eintlik weggegooi word.”

“Hoekom? Wat’s fout daarmee?”

“Hy is gekraak.”

“En?”

“Krake is ’n broeiplek vir kieme, Mamma.”

“Nou bêre dit as dit nie goed genoeg is vir jou nie.”

Hildie neem die bord verergd en gaan gooi dit in die vullisgat agter die huis.

Toe sy terugkom, gluur Mamma haar aan. “Is jy nou gelukkig?”

“Ten minste sal niemand siek word nie.”

“Ons eet al die laaste tien jaar uit daardie bord en nog niemand het siek geword nie!”

Bernie kom in en omhels Hildemara. “Ek bly nie vir ete nie, Mamma. Ek neem Elizabeth fliek toe.” Hy leun oor na Hildie. “Wil jy saamkom?”

Die versoeking is groot. “Ek is net vir ’n paar dae hier, Bernie. Ek wil dit graag met die hele gesin deurbring. Sê vir Elizabeth ek stuur groete. Dalk volgende keer.”

Aan tafel gesels almal behalwe Mamma. Cloe praat genoeg vir twee

mense en Rikki wil hoor van haar verpleegopleiding. Hildie vertel hulle van die kappie-seremonie en haar nuwe uniform. Sy sê nie dat sy Dame met die Lamp was of eerste in haar klas gestaan het nie. Sy hoop tevergeefs dat Mamma iets sal sê.

Sy lê die grootste deel van die nag wakker en staar na die plafon. Toe sy uiteindelik insluimer, kom Mamma kombuis toe en steek 'n lamp aan en beweeg op haar tone terwyl sy die koffiepot vol maak, rolletjies maak, eiers klits. Pappa kom in, trek sy kruisbande op. Hulle fluister in Duits. Hildemara hou haar oë toe en maak asof sy slaap. Toe hulle klaar geëet het, gaan hulle uit om te gaan werk. Gaaf van Mamma om Cloe en Rikka te laat inlê. Hildie het nooit die voorreg geniet nie.

Nadat sy aangetrek het, maak Hildie vuur in die houtstoof en sit 'n groot pot water op die plaat. Sy eet 'n rolletjie en drink koffie terwyl sy wag dat die water kook. Nadat sy 'n emmer vol water gemaak het, gaan haal sy 'n stuk seep en 'n lap en gaan staan hande-viervoet om die linoleumvloer te skrop.

"Wat dink jy doen jy?" Mamma staan agter haar, 'n melkemmer in haar hand.

"Ek probeer help." Hildie wring die bruinerige water uit die lappie. Sy sal 'n week lank moet skrop om hierdie vloer skoon te kry. Sy krimp by die idee aan hoeveel kieme deur Pappa se werkstewels ingedra is.

Mamma stort van die melk toe sy die emmer op die tafel neerplak. "Ons het twee dae lank skoongemaak voordat jy hier aangekom het! Ek's jammer as dit nie goed genoeg is vir jou nie!"

Hildie weet nie of sy moet om verskoning vra of dankie sê nie, en besluit dat nie een van die twee sal deug nie.

"Is dit wat hulle jou by die hospitaal geleer het? Hoe om vloere te skrop?"

Seergemaak deur Mamma se woorde, sit Hildie op haar hakke. "En bedpanne, Mamma. Moenie daarvan vergeet nie."

"Staan tog net op!"

Hildie staan op, gryp die emmer vuil water en gaan by die agterdeur uit. Sy klap die gaasdeur agter haar toe en gooi die water oor Mamma se blombedding. Dan gooi sy die emmer eenkant neer en gaan stap, ver tot by die Grand Junction waar sy na die hipnotiese water kyk. Hoe is dit moontlik om Mamma terselfdertyd lief te hê en te haat?

Toe sy teruggaan, is die huis leeg. Sy kry Pappa waar hy in die skuur besig is om 'n skoffelpik skerp te maak. Die geskree van metaal

teen steen ewenaar dit wat in Hildemara se gemoed aangaan. Toe hy haar sien, hou hy op. “Jy het nie saam met Mamma en die ander twee gaan fliek nie.”

“Ek is nie genooi nie.”

Hy skud sy kop en sit die skoffelpik eenkant neer. “Hulle wou hê jy moes saamgaan.”

“Hoe moes ek dit weet, Pappa?”

Hy frons. “Ek’s jammer dat niemand na jou kappie-seremonie toe gekom het nie, Hildemara. Ons sal by jou gradeplegtigheid wees.”

Ou Dash staan op en blaf toe Mamma se motor by die oprit indraai. Bernie sit agter die stuur en Cloe en Rikki skree van die lag toe hulle intrek. Almal peul uit. Selfs Mamma glimlag totdat sy Hildemara op ’n hooibaal in die skuur sien sit. “Waarheen het jy verdwyn?”

“Ek was by die Grand Junction.”

“Jy het ’n goeie fliek gemis.” Sy loop in die rigting van die huis.

“Ek sou gekom het as iemand my gevra het!”

“Iemand sou jou gevra het as jy by die huis was.”

Pappa laat sy asem uit en skud sy kop.

Hildemara loop huis toe. Sy het Cloe en Rikka se kamer vroeër opgeruim. Toe Hildie by die agterdeur inkom, lig sy die soom van een van die kwilte. “Ek het die bed met reguit hoeke opgemaak. Dis hoe ons dit in die hospitaal doen. Alles bly mooi ingesteek. Dink jy nie dit lyk mooi netjies nie?”

Rikki gooi haarself op die bed en lê met haar hande agter haar kop. “Mamma dink jy’s nou te hooghartig vir ons.”

“Is dit wat sy gesê het?”

“Sy sê jy wou nie ’n gekraakte bord op die tafel sit nie. Sy sê jy het een van haar mooiste borde weggegooi omdat jy nie gedink het dis goed genoeg vir jou om uit te eet nie.”

“Ek sou nie wou hê enigiemand moes uit ’n gekraakte bord eet nie. Kieme floreer in krake.”

“Wat is kieme nou so danig?” Rikki trek haar skouers op.

“Hulle is lewende organismes wat so klein is dat jy hulle nie kan sien nie, maar hulle is groot genoeg om jou baie, baie siek te maak. Ek het pasiënte aan diarree, braking, koors en kouekoors sien ly ... ”

“Bly stil!” sis Cloe. “Jy het Mamma se gevoelens seer genoeg gemaak.”

“En dit het nooit by iemand opgekom dat my gevoelens seergemaak sou wees toe niemand die moeite gedoen het om by my kappie-seremonie te wees nie?”

“Dis nie soos ’n gradeplegtigheid nie!”

“Dit was vir my belangrik.”

“Jy doen ook niks anders as kritiseer vandat jy by die huis gekom het nie.”

“Waarvan praat jy, Cloe?”

“Gisteraand aan tafel het jy Mamma se konfyt gekritiseer!”

Daar was muf bo-op die kweperjellie. Toe Hildie nie daaraan geraak het nie, wou Mamma weet hoekom dit nie meer haar gunsteling was nie. Hildie het haar vertel. Mamma het dit afgekrap en dit op die tafel neergeplak. “Daarso. Is dit beter, juffrou Nightingale?”

Hildie wil verduidelik. “Julle het nog nooit mense met voedselvergiftiging gesien nie.”

Cloe gluur haar aan. “Asof Mamma se kos enigiemand sal siek maak!”

Mamma verskyn in die deur. “Waaroor stry julle?”

“Niks nie,” se Hildie en Cloe gelyk.

“Nou hou julle *niks* vir julleself!” Sy gee Hildemara ’n vuil kyk en neem die wasgoed buitentoe. Hildemara weet dat sy alles gehoor het.

Hildie praat skaars die res van die tyd by die huis. Sy gaan saam met die gesin kerk toe en sit by Elizabeth en Bernie. Sy loop saam met Pappa huis toe.

“Dit lyk asof jy baie diep dink, Hildemara.”

“Te diep om oor te praat.”

“Ek weet hoe dit is.”

Mamma neem Hildemara busstasie toe. Hildie voel skuldig. “Ek’s jammer, Mamma. Ek het nie probeer om Mamma se kos of huishouding of – ”

“Ek’s jammer; ek’s jammer; ek’s jammer.” Mamma trap die brandstofpedaal dieper in.

Hildemara sê amper weer dat sy jammer is, maar byt op haar tong. “Ou gewoontes word nie maklik gebreek nie.”

Mamma lig haar voet effens van die pedaal. “Die wêreld is vuil, Hildemara Rose. Dit gaan nooit so skoon en netjies wees as wat jy wil hê nie. Jy sal op ’n manier daarmee moet vrede maak.”

Hildie sit regop en baklei teen die trane terwyl sy deur die vensters na die wingerde en boorde kyk. Sy sit minder as ’n meter van haar ma af, maar dit voel of daar miljoene myle tussen hulle is.

Mamma parkeer agter die busstasie. Sy hou haar hande op die stuurwiel en die motor luier. “Gaan jy huis toe kom vir Paasfees?”

“Wil Mamma hê ek moet kom?”

“Wat dink jy?”

Hildie kry die idee dat Mamma baie meer daarvan sal hou as sy in Oakland bly.

## Chapter 30

Now that probation had ended, Hildemara had moved upstairs to the higher realms of student quarters. Her new accommodations consisted of two rooms sleeping four each and divided by a bathroom with one toilet, one basin, and one bathtub. “Paradise!” She hardly had time to get to know her new roommates. Another washed out after a month, packing and disappearing quietly after a night shift.

Weeks passed in a flurry of eight-hour duty shifts, doctors’ lectures, classes, and examinations. When Hildie came down with a sore throat, Mrs. Kaufman checked her into the hospital for a tonsillectomy. It gave Hildie the excuse she needed not to go home for Easter.

Once back on her feet, she was assigned to work with Mrs. Jones on the general ward. “She’s a warhorse,” Boots told her. “Old as Methuselah. Served in the Great War and probably knows more about medicine than half the doctors in this hospital, but I’m warning you: Jones will expect you to be busy all the time. When you finish your duties, look for something to do to help out or she’ll skin, skewer, roast, and eat you alive for breakfast. Or lunch. Whichever comes sooner!”

Hildie found backs to rub, pillows to fluff, bedpans to scrub, cupboards to clean, linen cabinets to straighten.

A new patient arrived and pressed his buzzer within minutes. Hildie went running. He waved his hand frantically. “A bowl.” She held it for him while he coughed violently and gagged, spitting into it. He collapsed back. “I’m so tired of this cough.” He wheezed, his face white. Hildie made a notation on Mr. Douglas’s chart.

Another patient buzzed and Hildemara helped him with a bedpan. As she carried it to the utility room, Jones appeared. “Let me see that.” Shocked, Hildemara handed over the bedpan, wondering why anyone would want to look at such an oozing mess. If that wasn’t surprising enough, Jones lifted it and took a whiff. “Smells like typhoid to me.” She looked grim. “We’re sending a sample of this to the lab.”

“Don’t we have to have a doctor’s order?”

“He’s away right now, isn’t he? I’ll fill out the lab slip. We’ll get it down before he can make a fuss.” She took the sample to the lab herself.

The doctor stormed onto the ward and asked who she thought

she was to fill out lab slips and give orders. She wasn't a doctor, was she? Jones waited for his tirade to wind down before handing him the lab report. His face reddened. Without an apology, he handed them back. "He'll have to be quarantined."

"It's already taken care of, Doctor."

He stormed off the ward.

Boots laughed when Hildie told her about it. "She's gone horn-to-horn with more than one doctor. She can't abide fools, no matter how well educated. If she sees a hint of blood or pus, she's on it. And thank God she is. Have you ever seen a doctor hang around to look in a bedpan? Ha! That'll be the day!"

Mr. Douglas buzzed again the next morning just as Hildie came on duty. Hunched over, wracked with pain, he coughed. Exhausted, he could barely spit into the bowl she held for him. She rubbed his back and said comforting words. Jones stood in the doorway. As he flopped back in bed, gasping, she drew the curtain around the bed. She didn't have to ask this time. Hildemara held out the bowl. Jones barely glanced at it. "How long have you had this cough, Mr. Douglas?"

"Couple of months, I guess. Can't remember . . ." He panted.

"Too long. I can tell you that much," his roommate grumbled. "Keeps me awake all night coughing."

"Sorry about that." Mr. Douglas started to cough again.

"Can't you do something for him?" his roommate called out.

Jones edged Hildemara back from the bed and took her place. She put her hand against his back. When he finished coughing, she let him spit into the bowl again. "Try to rest. We're going to move you to a private room."

Hildemara wiped Mr. Douglas's forehead while Jones read the chart hanging on the end of the bed. She put it back, eyes bright with anger. She hid her emotions quickly and patted Mr. Douglas's foot. Motioning Hildemara away, she closed the door behind them as they left. "If that's bronchitis, I'll eat my nursing cap!"

"What do you think he has?"

"Full-blown tuberculosis."

The next morning, another doctor appeared, livid and ready for her blood. "I hear you quarantined my patient."

"I'm protecting my patients and nurses from contagion."

"Can you read a chart, Mrs. Jones?" He thrust it in her face. "Can you read *bron-chi-tis*?"

"If Mr. Douglas has bronchitis, no one will be happier than I. But

until I see his test results, I'm taking precautions."

"You've overstepped your authority, and I intend to have you fired!"

His white jacket flapped as he headed down the hall. Jones turned calmly to Hildie and the two other nurses hovering at the station. "All contagion safety measures stand until such time as Mr. Douglas is removed from our ward or I'm proven wrong. Is that clear, ladies?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Jones went about her business without so much as a wrinkle on her brow.

Mr. Douglas disappeared from the ward a few days later.

* * *

Tension mounted and tempers flared among the roommates. "You have a dresser, Patrice. Use it!"

"My tennis racket won't fit."

"When do you have time to play tennis? Would you answer me that?"

"Would you all shut up! I'm trying to study."

"Wait until you work in pedie. That Miss Brown is a frustrated old maid. She never gives time off. I'll be lucky if I ever have a date."

Hildemara gave up and began studying in the library and sleeping in the upstairs sleeping porch. Nurses came and went. She often met Boots in the cafeteria. "When you graduate, you can move off grounds. We could find a little place to share, something close to the hospital."

Boots took Hildemara to the pediatric ward her first day. "Nice and quiet, isn't it?" She grinned. Only the soft step of their rubber-soled shoes sounded in the corridor. A cart squeaked; a door opened; another cart of breakfast trays; the metallic clink of knife, fork, and spoon; quiet voices—all the usual sounds of a working hospital. The doors to pediatrics lay just ahead.

Boots snickered as she planted her hands and shoved them open. "Hang on to your cap, Flo! You're about to find out why this section has heavier insulation and soundproofing!"

Hildemara stopped, assaulted by the sound of howling infants. Shrill and loud, low and plaintive, tempestuous whimpers and wails struck her heart. One pitiful voice among the rest cried, "Mommy, I want my mommy!" Like a wave the word moved down the hall from room to room.

Hildemara didn't know whether to cover her face or her ears. "I don't know if I can do this, Boots."

Boots grimaced. "I know it's hard, Flo, but you haven't been on the terminal ward yet. I cried, too. You'll get used to it. Dry your tears, honey. Put a smile back on your face and get busy. They need you. I'll see you later in the cafeteria."

Miss Brown gathered the nurses and introduced Hildemara, then led them from one patient to the next on rounds. Miss Brown explained every diagnosis, treatment, and home background before talking to each patient. Hildemara's heart broke at so many young patients—some in the tonsil ward, others in the surgical group. She reviewed an appendectomy, a hernia repair, plastic surgery for cleft palates. One child had a feeding problem, another pneumonia, another flu, and on to the long-term cases of post-polio, dystrophy, malnutrition, to the preemie room for babies in need of the most careful and specialized care. All through viewing the misery, Miss Brown smiled. She talked to each of her patients, knowing each one's history. She patted a bottom here and stroked a forehead there. She took extended hands, squeezed a toe, picked up another little one for a gentle rocking and back rub before putting the child back in bed.

"She's like another mother," one of the nurses whispered to Hildemara.

A mother with nursing skills beyond the ordinary.

Later in the afternoon, Hildemara went to check on a little boy who had been badly burned. She found Miss Brown sitting by his bed, holding his hand and reading him a book. "I thought you were off duty, Miss Brown."

"I only live a block away. Nurse Cooper said Brian asked for me."

Hildemara wondered if she would ever be as good a nurse as Miss Brown.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Flo." Boots sipped coffee in the cafeteria later that afternoon. "You're doing well. Better than most, in fact."

"I dream about my patients."

"Well, you'd better stop that. You won't be much use to them if you don't get a good night's sleep." She put her cup down. "You'll learn to do all you can and let go of them when you walk off the ward. If you don't, your nursing days are numbered."

Awakened one night, Hildemara found her face wet with tears, her heart still pounding. She had been dreaming of Brian and how his

father had held him down on a floor heater.

She tried to run and stop him, but her feet had been chained. She had tried to claw free, sobbing. Wiping her face, she sat up, trembling.

The sleeping porch did little to block out the sounds of the hospital. An ambulance siren came closer. Delivery trucks came and went. A nurse tiptoed across the sleeping porch and sank onto her cot. Two others whispered.

Hildemara knew she had to stop getting so involved with her patients. How could she be a good nurse if she allowed her heart to become attached to every patient she served? She rubbed her face, exhausted, heartsick. Papa came to mind. Closing her eyes, she could see him sitting in his chair, his Bible open, his face relaxed. Papa would tell her to trust in the Lord. Papa would tell her to pray.

Curled on her side, Hildemara prayed for Papa. Then she prayed for each of her patients. Names came to her mind, one after another, a dozen, two dozen, as though God was reminding her. At the end of each individual prayer, she let them go with a simple thought. "Brian belongs to You, Lord, not me. I give him into Your mighty, healing hands. Your will, not mine, be done. . . ."

Her body relaxed. She felt at peace. Tomorrow, she wouldn't wait until after midnight to pray. She would pray her way from one patient's bed to the next. She would imagine Jesus walking beside her from room to room. She would do what she could as a nurse and leave the rest to God's tender mercy.

* * *

From pediatrics, Hildemara went on duty in geriatrics. From one extreme to another, she thought, depressed at the sight of the long wards, bed after bed, filled with cantankerous old men to the east and restless old ladies to the west. No matter how hard the nursing staff worked, the place often reeked of bowel movements and urine.

Hildie found herself talking to the Lord all day. *Lord, what can I say to give comfort to Mary today? What can I do to brighten Lester's mood?*

Some patients stared vacantly while Hildie checked their vitals or changed their diapers and bed linens. Others complained or stood at windows, staring out as though trying to find some escape. Some mumbled to themselves. Those still ambulatory roamed the hallway, pausing to talk to anyone who would listen. Hildemara tried to take time, but often had to rush to some patient in more dire need. She always had so much work to do and so little time. And so many had

needs.

Before breakfast trays arrived, Hildemara helped awaken and refresh patients by washing faces, scrubbing dentures, smoothing sheets and blankets she would change later. Sometimes patients didn't want to cooperate. If she couldn't cajole them, she left in hope they might allow her to help them later.

The head nurse took her aside. "You can't give in, Miss Waltert. Mr. Mathers has to be moved every two hours or he'll develop bedsores. I know he complains. I know he curses like a drunken sailor. But you cannot let that stop you from doing what's best for him. Now, go back in there and be firm!"

She had to be like Mama.

Old Ben Tucker, a diabetic who had had his right leg amputated, became her favorite.

He often had his bed raised and table in position before she came in. He'd grin. "I've been waiting for you, darling. Feed me or shoot me."

"You slept well, I take it."

"The nurse woke me up last night and gave me a sleeping pill."

For all his good spirits, he looked ashen. How many hours since his last pain pill? "How do you feel?"

"With my hands." He reached out.

She pushed them down. "Behave. I need to take your pulse."

"Go ahead, but bring it back. I need it."

When she came on duty one morning and found he'd died quietly in his sleep, she stood by his bed, crying. The head nurse came in and put her arm around her. "Your first death?" Hildie nodded. The head nurse sighed and released her. "Dry your tears, Miss Waltert. Close his eyes. That's right. Fold his hands. Now cover him with the sheet. Go back to the nurses' station and call the hospital morgue."

Work healed a wounded heart. Hildie had hours to go on the shift, and others to see, to cheer, to encourage.

Nursing wasn't what she had expected, but she loved it all the same. She loved being part of a team that helped people get back on their feet and back to the business of living. She loved easing those who faced death. She loved feeling needed and useful. She loved serving others. She felt she had found her place in the world. She had purpose. She had value.

Despite the hard work, the anguish of seeing so much pain, the grief of losing a patient, Hildemara knew she was exactly where God

wanted her.

## Hoofstuk 30

Noudat die proeftydperk verby is, word Hildemara na die beter deel van die studentekwartiere geskuif. Haar nuwe akkommodasie bestaan uit twee vertrekke met vier beddens elk wat deur ’n badkamer met een toilet, een wasbak en een bad geskei word. “Hemels!” Daar is amper nie tyd om haar nuwe kamermaats te leer ken nie. Dis skaars ’n maand later toe een van hulle ná ’n nagskof inkom, inpak en stil-stil verdwyn.

Die weke vlieg verby met ure lange diensbeurte, dokterslesings, klasse en eksamens. Toe Hildie mangelontsteking kry, laat mevrou Kaufman haar in die hospitaal opneem vir ’n tonsillektomie. Dit gee Hildie die nodige verskoning om nie vir Paasfees huis toe te gaan nie.

Toe sy weer op die been is, ontvang sy opdrag om saam met suster Jones in die algemene saal te gaan werk. “Sy’s ’n strydros,” sê Boots. “So oud soos Metusalag. Sy het in die Groot Oorlog verpleeg en weet waarskynlik meer van medisyne as helfte van die dokters in die hospitaal, maar ek waarsku jou: Jones gaan van jou verwag om die hele tyd besig te wees. Wanneer jy klaar is met jou pligte, moet jy maar iets kry om te doen, anders gaan sy jou afslag, spit en braai en vir ontbyt opeet. Of middagete. Wat ook al eerste kom!”

Hildie sorg dat sy rûe vryf, kussings pof, bedpanne skrop en linnekaste regpak.

’n Nuwe pasiënt daag op en dis net ’n paar minute voordat hy sy klokkie druk. Hildie kom aangedraf. Hy waai naarstig na haar. “’n Bakkie.” Sy hou een voor sy mond terwyl hy hewig hoes en stik en daarin spoeg. Hy val terug. “Ek’s so moeg vir hierdie hoes.” Hy hyg na asem, sy gesig wit. Hildie maak ’n aantekening op meneer Douglas se kaart.

’n Ander pasiënt druk sy klokkie en Hildemara help hom met ’n bedpan. Toe sy dit na die utiliteitskamer toe neem, maak Jones haar verskyning. “Gee dat ek kyk.” Hildemara gee die pan geskok vir haar, verbaas dat enigiemand na so ’n grillerige spulletjie sal wil kyk. Asof dit nie verrassend genoeg is nie, bring Jones dit nader aan haar gesig en ruik daaraan. “Ruik soos tifus.” Sy lyk strak. “Ons sal ’n monster

hiervan laboratorium toe moet stuur."

"Het ons nie 'n dokter se handtekening nodig nie?"

"Hy's nie nou hier nie. Ek sal die laboratoriumstrokie invul. Ons sal dit reeds gedoen hê voordat hy 'n drama kan maak." Sy neem die monster self laboratorium toe.

'n Rukkie later storm die dokter die saal binne en vra haar wie sy dink sy is om laboratoriumstrokies in te vul. Sy is immers nie 'n dokter nie. Jones wag totdat sy tirade verby is voordat sy die laboratoriumverslag aan hom oorhandig. Sy gesig word rooi. Hy gee dit terug sonder om verskoning te maak. "Hy sal onder kwarantyn geplaas moet word."

"Ek het reeds daarvoor gesorg, Dokter."

Hy storm uit.

Boots lag toe Hildie haar daarvan vertel. "Sy het al met meer as een dokter kop gestamp. Sy het nie tyd vir dwase nie, maak nie saak hoe geleerd nie. As sy 'n sweempie bloed of etter ruik, maak sy werk daarvan. En dank die Here daarvoor. Het jy al ooit 'n dokter lank genoeg sien rondstaan om na 'n bedpan te kyk? Ha! Dit sal die dag wees!"

Meneer Douglas ontbied Hildie weer die volgende oggend toe sy aan diens kom. Hy sit vooroorgeboë van die pyn en hoes. Hy is so uitgemergel dat hy skaars in die bakkie kan spoeg wat sy voor hom hou. Sy vryf oor sy rug en sê vertroostende woorde. Jones staan in die deur. Toe hy teen sy kussings terugsak, trek sy die gordyn rondom sy bed. Hierdie keer hoef sy nie te vra nie. Hildemara hou die bakkie na haar toe uit. Jones kyk skaars daarna. "Hoe lank sukkel u al met hierdie hoes, meneer Douglas?"

"'n Paar maande, dink ek. Kan nie onthou nie ... " kom dit uitasem.

"Te lank. Dit kan ek jou vertel," brom die ander pasiënt in die kamer. "Hou my die hele nag wakker met sy hoesery."

"Jammer daaroor." Meneer Douglas begin weer hoes.

"Kan julle nie iets vir hom doen nie?" vra die ander man.

Jones stoot Hildemara weg van die bed en gaan staan in haar plek. Sy plaas haar hand teen sy rug. Toe hy klaar gehoes het, laat sy hom weer in die bakkie spoeg. "Probeer rus. Ons gaan u na 'n privaat kamer toe skuif."

Hildemara vee meneer Douglas se voorkop af terwyl Jones die kaart aan die voetenent van die bed lees. Toe sy dit terugsit, glinster haar oë van woede. Sy onderdruk haar emosies vinnig en raak aan meneer Douglas se voet. Sy beduie Hildemara om te volg en trek die deur

agter haar toe. “As dit brongitis is, eet ek my verpleegkappie op!”

“Wat dink u het hy?”

“Gevorderde tuberkulose.”

Die volgende oggend maak ’n ander woedende dokter sy opwagting. Hy lyk lus vir baklei. “Ek hoor jy het my pasiënt onder kwarantyn geplaas.”

“Ek probeer net my verpleegsters en pasiënte teen kontaminasie beskerm.”

“Kan jy ’n kaart lees, mevrou Jones?” Hy druk dit in haar gesig. “Kan jy *bron-gi-tis* lees?”

“Niemand sal so bly soos ek wees as meneer Douglas brongitis het nie. Maar tot tyd en wyl ek sy uitslae sien, tref ek voorsorg.”

“Jy het hierdie keer te ver gegaan, en ek gaan my bes doen om te sorg dat jy afgedank word!”

Sy wit jas wapper toe hy in die gang afmarsjeer. Jones draai kalm na Hildie en die twee ander verpleegsters by die diensstasie. “Alle kontaminasie-maatreëls geld totdat meneer Douglas geskuif word of ek verkeerd bewys word. Is dit duidelik, dames?”

“Ja, Mevrou.”

Jones hervat haar werk sonder om ’n oog te knip.

’n Paar dae later verdwyn meneer Douglas uit die saal.

* * *

Die spanning bou en humeure vlam onder die kamermaats. “Jy het ’n kas, Patrice. Gebruik dit.”

“Dis nie groot genoeg vir my tennisraket nie.”

“Wanneer het jy tyd om tennis te speel? Sal jy my dit sê?”

“Sal julle asseblief tog net stilbly. Ek probeer leer.”

“Wag totdat jy in pediatrie werk. Suster Brown is ’n gefrustreerde oujongnooi. Sy gee ’n mens nie ’n minuut af nie. Ek sal gelukkig wees as ek ooit op ’n afspraak kan gaan.”

Hildemara gee op en begin om in die biblioteek te studeer en op die boonste slaapstoep te slaap. Verpleegsters kom en gaan. Sy kry Boots dikwels in die kafeteria. “Wanneer jy jou diploma het, hoef jy nie meer hier te bly nie. Ons kan ’n plekkie deel, iets naby die hospitaal.”

Op haar eerste dag neem Boots Hildemara na die pediatriese saal. “Dis heerlik stil, nè?” grinnik sy op pad. Dis net hulle sagte rubbersool-voetval wat deur die gang weerklink. ’n Waentjie piep; ’n

deur gaan oop; nog ’n waentjie met ontbytskottels; die metaalagtige klanke van mes, vurk en lepel; sagte stemme – al die geluide van ’n werkende hospitaal. Die deure na pediatrie lê net voor hulle.

Boots gee ’n laggie toe sy haar hande op die deure plant en hulle oopstoot. “Hou vas aan jou kappie, Flo! Jy gaan nou uitvind waarom hierdie afdeling swaarder isolasie het en meer klankdig is!”

Hildemara steek vas, die geluid van huilende babas soos ’n aanslag. Skril en harde, lae en kermende, ontstoke huilstemmetjies ruk aan haar hart. Een jammerlike stem onder die res skree: “Mamma, ek wil my mamma hê!” Die woord beweeg soos ’n golf van die een na die volgende kamer in die gang.

Hildemara weet nie of sy haar gesig of haar ore moet toedruk nie. “Ek weet nie of ek dit kan doen nie, Boots.”

Boots gryns. “Ek weet dis moeilik, Flo, maar jy was nog nie in die terminale saal nie. Ek het ook gehuil. Jy sal daaraan gewoond raak. Vee jou trane af, my skat. Plak ’n glimlag op jou gesig en raak besig. Hulle het jou nodig. Ek sien jou later in die kafeteria.”

Suster Brown roep die verpleegsters byeen en stel Hildemara aan hulle voor voordat sy hulle saam met haar op saalronde neem. Suster Brown verduidelik elke diagnose, behandeling en huislike agtergrond voordat sy met die pasiëntjie praat. Hildemara se hart breek oor sommige van die jong pasiënte – party met mangelontsteking, ander in die chirurgiese groep. Die suster bespreek ’n blindedermoperasie, ’n breukoperasie en plastiese chirurgie om gesplete verhemeltes reg te maak. Een kind het ’n voedingsprobleem, ’n ander mangelontsteking, ’n volgende griep. Dan is dit die langtermyn-gevalle van post-polio, distrofie, wanvoeding, en daarna na die prenatale eenheid vir babas wat die versigtigste en mees gespesialiseerde sorg benodig. Ondanks die aanskoue van soveel ellende bly juffrou Brown vir haar pasiënte glimlag. Sy vryf ’n ruggie en streel ’n voorkop. Sy vat aan uitgestrekte handjies, knyp ’n toontjie, tel een van die kleintjies op en wieg haar ’n paar oomblikke terwyl sy oor haar ruggie vryf voordat sy haar weer neersit.

“Sy is soos ’n tweede ma,” fluister een van die verpleegsters.

’n Ma met ’n buitengewone gawe vir verpleging.

Later die middag gaan loer Hildemara in by ’n klein seuntjie wat sleg gebrand is. Suster Brown sit langs sy bed vir hom en lees, sy handjie in hare. “Ek het gedink u is van diens af, Suster.”

“Ek bly net ’n paar blokke van die hospitaal af. Verpleegster Cooper het gesê Brian het na my gevra.”

Hildemara wonder of sy ooit so ’n goeie verpleegster soos suster Brown sal wees.

“Moenie so kwaai op jouself wees nie, Flo.” Boots teug aan haar koffie waar hulle later die middag in die kafeteria sit. “Jy doen goed. Beter as die meeste ander.”

“Ek droom van my pasiënte.”

“Dan moet jy ophou daarmee. Jy gaan nie veel vir hulle beteken as jy nie ’n goeie nagrus inkry nie.” Sy sit haar beker neer. “Jy sal nog leer om alles in jou vermoë te doen en hulle te laat gaan wanneer jy huis toe gaan. Anders is jou dae as verpleegster getel.”

Toe Hildemara een nag wakker word, is haar gesig nat van die trane en haar hart wild aan die klop. Sy het van Brian gedroom en hoe sy pa hom teen ’n verwarmer vasgedruk het.

Sy het probeer hardloop om hom te keer, maar haar voete was geboei. Sy het haarself snikkend probeer bevry. Sy bewe toe sy haar trane afvee en regop sit.

Die slaapstoep doen nie veel om die hospitaalgeluide uit te doof nie. ’n Ambulanssirene kom nader. Afleweringswaens kom en gaan. ’n Verpleegster loop op haar tone oor die slaapstoep en sak op haar bed neer. Twee ander lê en fluister.

Hildemara weet sy moet ophou om so betrokke te raak by haar pasiënte. Hoe kan sy ’n goeie verpleegster wees as sy toelaat dat sy so geheg raak aan elke pasiënt? Sy vryf uitgeput en hartseer oor haar gesig. Sy dink aan Pappa. Toe sy haar oë sluit, sien sy hom in sy stoel met sy Bybel oop op sy skoot, sy gesig ontspanne. Pappa sal sê dat sy op die Here moet vertrou. Pappa sal sê dat sy moet bid.

Hildemara lê opgekrul op haar sy en bid vir Pappa. Dan bid sy vir elkeen van haar pasiënte. Die name kom by haar op, die een na die ander, ’n dosyn, twee dosyn. Dis asof die Here haar aan hulle herinner. Elke individuele gebed word met ’n eenvoudige gedagte afgesluit. “Brian behoort aan U, Here, nie aan my nie. Ek gee hom oor in u magtige, genesende hande. Laat nie my wil nie, maar u wil geskied … ”

Haar liggaam ontspan en sy raak rustig. Môre gaan sy nie tot ná middernag wag om te bid nie. Sy sal met ’n gebed in haar hart van die een pasiënt na die volgende beweeg. Sy sal Jesus in haar gedagtes saam met haar van kamer tot kamer sien loop. Sy sal alles doen wat vir haar as verpleegster moontlik is, en die res aan die Here oorlaat.

* * *

Toe sy by pediatrie klaarmaak, word Hildemara na die geriatriese afdeling oorgeplaas. Van die een uiterste na die ander, dink sy, depressief by die aanskoue van die lang sale, bed na bed vol iesegrimmige ou mans in die westelike en rustelose ou dames in die oostelike vleuel. Maak nie saak hoe hard die verpleegpersoneel werk nie, die plek ruik dikwels na ontlasting en urine.

Hildie betrap haarself dat sy heeldag met die Here praat. *Here, wat kan ek vandag sê om Mary te bemoedig? Wat kan ek doen om Lester op te beur?*

Sommige pasiënte staar in die niet terwyl Hildie hulle lewenstekens nagaan of hulle doeke ruil en beddens oortrek. Ander kla of staan voor die vensters en staar asof op soek na ’n manier om te ontsnap. Sommige mompel by hulleself. Dié wat nog self kan loop, dwaal die gang op en af, en maak geselsies met enigiemand wat bereid is om te luister. Hildemara probeer tyd afknyp, maar moet haar dikwels na ’n pasiënt haas wat haar nodiger het.

Voordat die ontbyttrollies ingestoot word, help Hildemara om die pasiënte wakker te maak en te verfris deur gesigte te was, kunstande te skrop, lakens en komberse reg te trek wat sy later sal aftrek. Soms wil die pasiënte nie saamwerk nie. As sy hulle nie kan ompraat nie, los sy hulle in die hoop dat hulle haar sal toelaat om hulle later te help.

Die hoofsuster neem haar opsy. “Jy mag nie ingee nie, juffrou Waltert. As meneer Mathers nie elke twee ure omgedraai word nie, gaan hy bedsere ontwikkel. Ek weet hy kla. Ek weet hy vloek soos ’n dronk matroos. Maar jy mag nie toelaat dat dit jou daarvan weerhou om te doen wat die beste is nie. Gaan nou terug soontoe en wees ferm!”

Sy moet soos Mamma wees.

Ou Ben Tucker, ’n diabeet wie se regterbeen geamputeer is, word haar gunsteling.

Hy sorg dikwels dat sy bed regop en tafel in posisie is voordat sy inkom. Dan grinnik hy. “Ek het vir jou gewag, my skat. Voer my of skiet my.”

“Ek neem aan u het goed geslaap.”

“Die suster het my laas nag wakker gemaak en ’n slaappil gegee.”

Sy opgewektheid steek nie weg dat hy bleek is nie. Hoe lank gelede sedert hy laas ’n pynpil gehad het? “Hoe voel u?”

“Met my hande.” Hy hou hulle uit.

Sy druk hulle af. “Gedra u. Ek moet u pols neem.”

“Nou toe, maar bring hom terug. Ek het hom nodig.”

Toe sy een oggend aan diens kom en hoor dat hy in sy slaap oorlede is, staan sy en huil langs sy bed. Die hoofsuster kom in en plaas ’n arm rondom haar. “Jou eerste sterfte?” Hildie knik. Die hoofsuster sug en laat haar gaan. “Droog jou trane af, juffrou Waltert. Maak sy oë toe. Dis reg. Vou sy hande. Maak hom toe met die laken. Gaan terug na die diensstasie en bel die hospitaal se lykshuis.”

Werk is genesend vir ’n gewonde hart. Hildie het nog ure se werk voor haar, ander pasiënte om te sien, om op te beur en aan te moedig.

Verpleging is nie wat sy verwag het nie, maar sy is lief vir haar werk. Sy geniet dit om deel van ’n span te wees wat mense help om weer op te staan en te lewe. Sy geniet dit om vir sterwendes verligting te bring. Sy geniet dit om bruikbaar en nuttig te voel. Sy geniet dit om ander te dien. Sy voel dat sy haar plek in die wêreld gevind het. Sy het ’n doel. Sy het waarde.

Ondanks die harde werk, die ontsteltenis by die aanskoue van soveel pyn, die smart rondom ’n verlies van ’n pasiënt, weet Hildemara dat sy presies is waar die Here haar wil hê.

## Chapter 31

When summer rolled around, Hildemara used a portion of her hard-earned savings to attend Bernie's college graduation. Elizabeth came with Mama and Papa, Cloe and Rikki. When she asked Hildemara to be her maid of honor, Hildemara laughed joyously and said of course, then worried how she'd afford a fancy dress. Elizabeth whispered, "My mother wants me to have a big ceremony, but I want something simple." Bernie could not have picked a better girl. When the wedding day arrived, Hildemara wore the navy blue dress with white cuffs and red buttons Cloe had made for her. She wore it again to Cloe's graduation and got a pinch from her sister after the ceremony.

"I'm going to have to make you a new dress."

"Please." Hildie grinned. "I suppose you'll be dreaming up designs for wedding dresses one of these days, too."

"Ha!" Cloe thought marriage a boring waste of time and talent. "I have a career to build. Mama's taking me down to the Otis Art Institute in a few weeks. I can't wait!"

Clotilde had looked confident and happy as she strode across the stage to receive her diploma. Laughing, she'd tossed her mortarboard in the air. Her hair had darkened to wheat, and she kept it cut short in a bob that suited her heart-shaped face. Both of Hildie's sisters had a confidence she had lacked until recently.

"Nursing seems to suit you, Hildie. You look happy."

"I've found where I belong."

"Met any guys?"

Hildie laughed. "Half of my patients are guys."

"I don't mean patients."

"I know what you mean, Cloe, but I'm not looking for romance."

* * *

Boots graduated and hired on full-time at Merritt. Hildemara still met her in the cafeteria every chance they got. "I'll give it a year or two here, and then I'll look into hospitals in Hawaii or Los Angeles. Might be nice to be somewhere warm and sunny all the time." The Bay Area fog got to her.

Hildemara completed her second year of nurses' training. When she started the last year, she received a blue SMH patch to sew onto the corner of her cap. Six months later, she removed the patch and

pinned a tiny gold replica of the school in its place.

Every hour she wasn't on duty, she studied for her upcoming examinations. The final would cover all three years of training. She gathered with the other students from her dwindling class, which had dropped to thirteen, and joined in quizzing one another on medical and surgical procedures, diseases, pediatrics, obstetrics, bacteriology, materia medica, psychiatry, measurements, and dosages.

Toward the end of her third year, the academic load lightened and began to focus more on job prevalence, requirements, salaries, professional organizations, and available college courses. Hildie thought of Mama's push to go to UCB. Maybe she would end up taking classes there, after all.

"You must keep up with new methods and ideologies, ladies," the General lectured. "Every year brings changes in medicine and nursing. Those who don't keep up fall behind and eventually find themselves out of a job."

Hildemara talked to Boots about it. "How many nurses can afford college or have the energy to attend classes after a full day's work?"

"It's a fact of life, Flo. Remember Miss Brown? She's been demoted to ward nurse. No college degree." She shrugged. "It's a pity, but that's the way it is. If you want a supervisory position like Mrs. Kaufman, you're going to have to go to college."

"I just want to be a nurse."

"You're a good one already." Boots brightened. "Say. We have to get you a nice outfit before your graduation. It's only a few weeks off."

"I don't have much money." She'd always admired the way Boots dressed off duty. She always had something stylish and classy.

"Meet me Saturday morning. I'll take you to my favorite store."

"Boots, I don't think—"

"Don't argue. You are not wearing that navy blue dress again!"

They rode a city bus downtown. Boots walked along, whistling, an impish look on her face. Hildemara had to hurry to keep up. "Here we are!" Boots stopped in front of a Presbyterian church.

"A church?"

Boots took her by the arm and led her around the side. A door stood open with a sign on the steps: *Rummage Sale*.

"You wouldn't believe some of the things I've found here. Come on!" Boots picked through the piles of used clothing with an eye to fashion that would have impressed Cloe. She put three outfits together

in a matter of minutes. “One for your days off, one for afternoon teas, and one for a night on the town!” She even found a hat that would work with all three ensembles, and two pairs of shoes.

Hildemara paid for the items. “I can’t believe I just bought an entire wardrobe for under six dollars! I’m going to write to my mother. Maybe it’ll impress her.”

“A smart girl learns where to shop,” Boots told her on the walk back to the bus stop. “But don’t you dare tell any of the other girls where I go.” She laughed. “They all think I shop at Capwell’s or the Emporium!”

As it turned out, Hildemara needed all three outfits for the week of graduation. On Monday, the nursing school treated the graduates to an afternoon tea with the top brass of the hospital. The night before graduation, the hospital VIPs and alumni took the graduating class to the Fairmont Hotel for dinner. Her classmates gaped when Hildie came into the lobby to wait for their ride.

“Holy cow!”

“Get a load of Flo!”

Hildemara blushed as they gathered around her.

“Where have you been shopping?”

She shrugged, quelling the urge to laugh. “Here and there.”

The morning of graduation, Hildie went for mail call, praying Papa and Mama had written. No word. She grew more nervous as the day passed. She had written home, inviting the family to come. She’d only heard back from Cloe and Bernie and Elizabeth; all three planned to come in Bernie’s new car.

That afternoon, Hildie and her classmates cleared the dining hall of tables and lined up chairs, borrowed potted ferns and palms, and set up a makeshift stage for graduation.

“Hey!” one of the girls called, rushing in to help finish setting up. “You’ll never guess who’s speaking tonight.”

“Who?”

“Doc Bria!”

“Quick!” Hildie said in mock horror. “Someone bring in John Bones and install the alarm clock!” The girls laughed.

“Can’t you just hear him already,” another said, and she put her hand over her heart. “‘Ah, ladies, it will be my great pleasure to pour forth in my most meticulous rhetoric all the prosaic platitudes of my professional pomposity in preposterous proportions of propitious postulations.’”

They roared with laughter.

Mrs. Kaufman appeared in the doorway. “Ladies, please, keep the noise down. Others are studying.”

When it came time to dress for the ceremony, Hildie put on her white silk stockings and shoes, her new white uniform and cap with gold pin. Pulling the cape around her shoulders, she secured the mandarin collar. Nervous, she stood in the polished corridor outside the dining hall now lit with candelabras on either side of the stage. As she led her class into the room, she spotted Boots first, then across the aisle stood Bernie and Elizabeth and Cloe. She blinked in surprise when she saw Papa and then Mama, Rikki standing on the other side of them.

Mrs. Kaufman, eyes glistening with tears, handed out plaques of Florence Nightingale’s pledge, which Hildemara recited with her classmates. She received her certificate and another gold pin.

The lights came on and cheers filled the room. Rikki pressed through the crowd to reach Hildie. “You look so beautiful in white! You have to sit for me. You look exactly how I imagine Florence Nightingale. All you need is a lamp.”

Bernie had his arm around Elizabeth. “You look like you belong here, Sis.”

And then Mama stood in front of her, Papa right behind her. He smiled broadly, his hands on Mama’s shoulders. Had he pushed her forward? “We’re proud of you, Hildemara. You did it.”

Mama just looked at her. She didn’t say a word. Hildie saw her swallow hard as if words wanted to come, but couldn’t. When she raised her hand, Hildie grasped it. She couldn’t speak either, and it took all the self-control she could muster not to cry.

“She’s a grand girl!” Boots appeared and spun Hildie into another hug. “Best in the class.” Hildie made quick introductions.

“Are you coming home for a while?” Mama asked.

Surprised she had asked, Hildie shook her head. “No. I’ve been hired to join the Merritt staff. I’m back on duty day after tomorrow.”

“So soon?” Papa looked disappointed. “Mama and I thought you’d be home for a few weeks, at least.”

“I won’t be able to come home for a while, Papa. I’m fortunate to have a job so soon. I made twelve dollars a month this year, and I still need to pay Cloe for making the two uniforms.”

“One to wear, one to wash.” Cloe smiled, shaking her head.

“And I’ll have rent. Boots found a little house a few blocks from

the hospital. We're sharing expenses."

Mama didn't say anything, not one word, until after refreshments and the conversation died down. People began to go out on the town. "It's getting late." Mama looked up at Papa. "We need to start back."

Hildie fought back the tears. "I'm glad you came."

"We wouldn't have missed it." Papa hugged her hard. "Keep saying your prayers and reading your Bible." He patted her back and let her go.

"I will, Papa." She wrapped her arms around Mama and hugged her. "Thank you for coming. It meant the world to me." She felt Mama's hand on her back, and then she withdrew from Hildie's embrace.

"You did it, Hildemara Rose." Her smile seemed a little sad. "I hope the life you've chosen for yourself makes you happy."

Hildie leaned forward and kissed Mama's cheek. "I guess I'm about to find out, aren't I?"

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*Hildemara Rose is now a full-fledged nurse. She was the top student in her class and had the honor of leading the procession. And she did look like Florence Nightingale in her white uniform and navy blue cape. My girl stood so tall with her head high! I could imagine her standing on a battlefield with her lamp held high, giving the wounded hope.*

*She is not a timid child anymore. My girl knows her place in the world. I am so proud of her, Rosie. The evening would have been perfect if not for the speaker, some long-winded doctor who didn't want to leave the podium. I had a dreadful headache and it was difficult to concentrate on what he had to say. And then the press of people made the pain worse.*

*I wanted to tell Hildemara how proud she made me, but I couldn't get the words out. Niclas spoke for both of us. I asked if she was coming home, hoping I would have time and opportunity to talk with her, but she has already been hired by Merritt Hospital and will be on official duty long before you receive this letter. Not only that. She and her friend Jasia Boutacoff have found a house to rent. She is a woman now, with a life of her own.*

* * *

Hildemara moved in with Boots a week after joining the Merritt nursing staff. The house wasn't far from the hospital, so she walked

every day she worked. The house felt like a palace after the small dorm bedroom, and quiet after the sleeping porch she'd shared with dozens of nurses coming in and going out. The house had a few drawbacks: a big yard to care for and a large fruit-producing lemon tree. Mr. Holmes, their next-door neighbor, said the previous tenant had driven nails in the trunk in hope of killing the tree. "Must have given it a boost of something!" Hildie sacked up lemons every week and dropped them off at the hospital kitchen.

"We've got to do something about the yard." Hildie worried. "We're going to be the neighborhood slobs."

"Who cares? It's the landlord's problem, not ours. He said he'd come by and do it when he has time."

The landlord only came on the day rent was due, and by then Hildie and Boots had learned the roof leaked and the kitchen sink had a habit of stopping up. Mr. Dawson said he'd send someone to fix it.

"When hell freezes over, he'll fix it." Boots called on a friend to do it, then sent a bill to the landlord. When he didn't pay, she deducted it from the next month's rent. When Mr. Dawson complained, Boots stood toe-to-toe with him in front of the house.

Neighbors came out to listen. Boots called Mr. Holmes to witness that Mr. Dawson had agreed to her deducting a portion of the rent for repairs. When she came inside the house, she slapped her hands together as though dusting the man off. Hildie laughed. "You remind me of Mama!"

Finally, embarrassed by the state of the front yard, Hildie asked Mr. Holmes if she could borrow his lawn mower and hedge clippers. She remembered how Papa had disdained people who "let their land go" and didn't want to be the dump of the block.

"Sorry." Mr. Holmes shook his head. "I don't loan tools, Miss Waltert. Learned the hard way people don't return them."

"I'd buy a lawn mower and clippers if I could, but I don't have the money."

"What do you do for a living?"

"We're both nurses at Merritt."

He peered over the fence at the yard, rubbed his chin, and shook his head. "Sure is a mess. Tell you what. I've got an old mower under the house. I'll sharpen the blades and grease her up a bit and you can have her. I'll give you my wife's old clippers. It's clear that place you're living in needs work. How much rent is Dawson charging you girls?" When Hildie told him, he whistled. "No wonder you don't have

anything left over. He sure saw you coming, didn't he?"

Mr. Holmes brought the lawn mower and clippers over the next Saturday. "All sharp and ready to go."

After an hour, Hildie sat on the front steps to rest. Mr. Holmes peered over the fence and asked how the lawn mower was working. "It's working fine, Mr. Holmes, but I should've asked if you had a sickle." Hildie wiped sweat from her brow.

He laughed. "Looks better than it did."

"Thanks for the mower and clippers, Mr. Holmes. I'll keep you supplied with lemons."

"Call me George. And as for lemons, I already take what I want off the branches hanging over my fence."

## Hoofstuk 31

Toe dit somer word, gebruik Hildemara 'n gedeelte van haar swaarverdiende spaargeld om Bernie se gradeplegtigheid by te woon. Elizabeth kom saam met Mamma en Pappa, Cloe en Rikki. Sy vra Hildemara om haar strooimeisie te wees en dis eers nadat sy laggend ja gesê het dat sy wonder of sy 'n mooi rok kan bekostig. Elizabeth fluister: "My ma wil hê dit moet 'n groot seremonie wees, maar ek wil dit eenvoudig hou." Bernie kon nie 'n beter meisie gekies het nie. Toe die troudag aanbreek, dra Hildemara die vlootblou rok met wit boordjies en rooi knope wat Cloe vir haar gemaak het. Sy dra dit weer na Cloe se diplomaplegtigheid en kry ná die tyd 'n knyp van haar suster.

"Ek sal vir jou nuwe rok moet maak."

"Asseblief." Hildie grinnik. "Jy gaan seker ook een van die dae begin trourokke ontwerp."

"Ha!" Cloe beskou die huwelik as 'n vermorsing van tyd en talent. "Ek moet aan my loopbaan dink. Mamma neem my oor 'n paar weke na die Otis Art Institute toe. Ek kan nie wag nie!"

Clotilde het selfversekerd en gelukkig gelyk toe sy oor die verhoog gestap het om haar diploma te ontvang. Sy het haar studentebaret laggend in die lug gegooi. Haar hare het donkerder geword en sy dra dit in 'n kort bob wat by haar hartvormige gesig pas. Albei Hildie se susters beskik oor 'n selfvertroue wat sy tot kort gelede nie gehad het nie.

"Verpleging pas jou, Hildie. Jy lyk gelukkig."

"Ek het my plek gevind."

"Het jy al enige ouens ontmoet?"

Hildie lag. "Die helfte van my pasiënte is ouens."

"Ek bedoel nie pasiënte nie."

"Ek weet wat jy bedoel, Cloe, maar ek is nie op soek na romanse nie."

Met Boots se voltooiing van haar opleiding kry sy ’n voltydse aanstelling by die Merritt. Sy en Hildemara ontmoet mekaar nog steeds gereeld by die kafeteria. “Ek sal so ’n jaar of twee hier bly, en dan wil ek na hospitale in Hawaii of Los Angeles gaan kyk. Ek sal nie omgee om iewers te wees waar dit altyd warm en sonnig is nie.” Die Baai se mistigheid begin haar vang.

Hildemara voltooi haar tweede jaar as leerlingverpleegster. Met die aanvang van haar laaste jaar ontvang sy ’n blou SMH-strokie wat op die hoek van haar kappie vasgewerk moet word. Ses maande later trek sy die lappie los en word ’n klein goue replika van die kollege daar vasgesteek.

Elke oomblik wanneer sy nie besig is nie, studeer sy vir die komende eksamen. Die eindeksamen dek alles wat sy die afgelope drie jaar geleer het. Sy en die ander studente uit haar kwynende klas wat nou tot 13 gekrimp het, vorm studiegroepe en toets mekaar se kennis van chirurgiese prosedures, siektes, pediatrie, obstetrie, bakteriologie, materia medica, psigiatrie, afmetings en dosisse.

Teen die einde van haar derde jaar is die akademiese lading ligter en ontvang hulle lesings oor die beskikbaarheid en vereistes vir poste, salarisse, professionele organisasies en beskikbare kollegekursusse. Hildie dink aan Mamma se begeerte dat sy Berkeley toe moet gaan. Dalk sal sy uiteindelik tog daar gaan klasloop.

“Julle moet op hoogte bly van nuwe metodes en ideologieë, dames,” sê die Generaal. “Elke jaar kom met veranderings op die mediese en verpleeggebied. Dié wat nie bybly nie, raak agter en sit uiteindelik sonder werk.”

Hildemara praat met Boots daaroor. “Hoeveel verpleegsters kan kollege bekostig of het ná ’n volle dag se werk nog die energie om klas te loop?”

“Dit is ’n feit van die lewe, Flo. Jy onthou nog vir suster Brown? Sy is na saalsuster verlaag. Want sy het nie ’n graad nie.” Sy haal haar skouers op. “Dis jammer, maar dis hoe dit werk. As jy ’n toesighoudende posisie soos mevrou Kaufman wil hê, sal jy kollege toe moet gaan.”

“Ek wil net ’n verpleegster wees.”

“Jy is alreeds ’n goeie een.” Boots verhelder. “Sê jou wat. Ons moet vir jou iets moois kry om vir jou diplomaplegtigheid te dra. Dis nog net ’n paar weke.”

“Ek het nie baie geld nie.” Sy het nog altyd bewondering gehad vir die manier hoe Boots in haar vrye tyd aantrek. Sy lyk altyd stylvol en

elegant.

“Kry my Saterdagoggend. Ek sal jou na my gunsteling winkel toe neem.”

“Boots, ek dink nie – ”

“Moenie stry nie. Jy gaan nie weer daardie vlootblou rokkie dra nie!”

Hulle neem die bus in stad toe. Boots loop met ’n ondeunde uitdrukking en fluit ’n vrolike deuntjie. Hildemara moet haar treë rek om by te bly. “Hier is ons!” Boots gaan staan voor ’n Presbiteriaanse kerk.

“’n Kerk?”

Boots neem haar aan die arm en lei haar om die gebou na ’n oop deur. Teen die trap is daar ’n bordjie wat lees: *Rommelverkoping*.

“Jy sal nie glo wat ek alles al hier raakgeloop het nie. Kom!” Boots pik-pik deur die bondels tweedehandse klere met ’n mode-oog wat Cloe sou beïndruk. Binne ’n paar minute het sy drie uitrustings saamgestel. “Een vir jou af dae, een vir wanneer jy gaan tee drink, en een vir wanneer jy in die aand uitgaan!” Sy kry selfs ’n hoed wat saam met al drie uitrustings gedra kan word en twee paar skoene.

Hildemara betaal vir die items. “Ek kan nie glo ek het so pas ’n hele klerekas vir minder as ses dollar gekoop nie! Ek gaan vir my ma skryf. Dalk sal dit haar beïndruk.”

“’n Slim dame leer waar om te koop,” preek Boots op pad terug na die bushalte. “Maar jy sê nie vir een van die ander meisies waar ek my goed kry nie.” Sy lag. “Hulle almal dink ek koop by Capwell’s of die Emporium!”

Uiteindelik blyk dit dat Hildemara al drie uitrustings vir die week van haar diplomaplegtigheid nodig het. Die Maandag trakteer die verpleegkollege die derdejaars op ’n tee saam met die bestuur van die hospitaal. Die aand voor die plegtigheid neem die hospitaal se hoëlui en alumni die finalejaars na die Fairmount Hotel vir ete. Haar klasmaats se monde hang oop toe Hildie in die voorportaal verskyn.

“Goeie genade!”

“Kyk vir Flo, julle!”

Hildemara bloos toe hulle om haar kom staan.

“By watter winkel het jy ingevaar?”

Sy trek haar skouers op en moet keer of sy lag. “Ag, hier en daar.”

Toe Hildemara die oggend van die plegtigheid gaan hoor of daar vir haar pos is, bid sy dat Pappa en Mamma geskryf het. Niks nie. Sy raak by die uur meer senuweeagtig. Sy het huis toe geskryf en die gesin

genooi om te kom. Sy het net van Cloe en Bernie en Elizabeth gehoor; hulle drie is van plan om met Bernie se nuwe motor te kom.

Daardie middag vaar Hildie en haar klasmaats die eetkamer in en begin tafels uitdra en stoele in rye pak. Hulle leen potplante en varings en daar word 'n tydelike verhoog vir die plegtigheid opgestel.

"Haai!" roep een van die meisies toe sy instorm om te help opstel. "Julle sal nooit raai wie vanaand se spreker is nie."

"Wie?"

"Dok Bria!"

"Gou!" sê Hildie in gemaakte afgryse. "Iemand gaan haal vir John Bones en installeer die wekker!" Die meisies lag.

"Ek hoor hom al," sê een van die ander en plaas haar hand oor haar hart. "Aa, dames, dit is my groot voorreg om in my hoogste retoriek uitdrukking te gee aan al die prosaïese gemeenplase van my professionele hoogdrawendheid, kompleet met absurde proporsies van welgevallige postulasies."

Die vertrek dreun van hulle gelag.

Mevrou Kaufman verskyn in die deur. "Dames, asseblief, hou julle in. Daar is ander studente wat leer."

Toe dit tyd word om te gaan aantrek, verklee Hildie in haar wit sykouse en skoene, haar nuwe wit uniform en kappie met sy goue speldjie. Nadat sy die mantel oor haar skouers gehang het, maak sy die mandarynkraag vas. Dan staan sy senuweeagtig in die gepoleerde gang buitekant die eetsaal wat nou deur kandelare aan weerskante van die verhoog verlig word. Toe sy haar klas inlei, sien sy eerste vir Boots. Dan vir Bernie en Elizabeth en Cloe aan die oorkant van die paadjie. Haar oë knip verras toe sy Pappa en toe Mamma en Rikki aan hulle ander kant sien staan.

Mevrou Kaufman, haar oë blink van die trane, oorhandig plakette met Florence Nightingale se gelofte wat Hildemara saam met haar klasmaats opsê. Sy ontvang haar sertifikaat en nog 'n goue speld.

Die ligte word aangeskakel en applous breek uit. Rikki vleg deur die mense tot by Hildie. "Jy lyk so mooi in wit! Jy moet vir my kom sit. Jy lyk presies soos wat ek my Florence Nightingale voorstel. Al wat jy nodig het, is 'n lamp."

Bernie staan met sy arm om Elizabeth. "Jy lyk asof jy hier hoort."

En toe staan Mamma voor haar, Pappa reg agter haar. Hy glimlag breed, sy hande op Mamma se skouers. Het hy haar vorentoe gestoot? "Ons is trots op jou, Hildemara. Jy het dit gedoen."

Mamma kyk net na haar. Sy sê nie 'n woord nie. Hildie sien dat sy

sluk asof haar woorde wil kom, maar nie kan nie. Toe sy haar hand oplig, gryp Hildie dit vas. Sy kan ook nie praat nie, en dit kos al haar selfbeheersing om nie te huil nie.

"Sy's ongelooflik!" Boots verskyn en trek Hildie in nog 'n omhelsing vas. "Beste in die klas." Hildie stel almal voor.

"Kom jy 'n bietjie huis toe?" vra Mamma.

Hildie skud haar kop, verras dat sy vra. "Nee. Ek het 'n aanstelling by die Merritt gekry. Ek is oormôre weer aan diens."

"So gou?" Pappa lyk teleurgesteld. "Ek en Mamma het gedink jy sal vir ten minste 'n paar weke by die huis wees."

"Ek sal vir 'n rukkie nie kan wegkom nie, Pappa. Ek is dankbaar dat ek so gou al 'n werk het. Ek het hierdie jaar twaalf dollar 'n maand gemaak, en ek moet Cloe nog vir die twee uniforms betaal."

"Een aan die bas, een in die was," glimlag Cloe kopskuddend.

"En ek moet huur betaal. Boots het 'n klein huisie 'n paar blokke van die hospitaal af gekry. Ons deel die kostes."

Mamma sê niks, nie 'n woord nie. Sy praat eers toe hulle klaar versnaperings geniet het en die gesels begin afneem. Rondom hulle maak die mense aanstaltes vir 'n aandjie uit. "Dit word laat." Mamma kyk op na Pappa. "Ons moet in die pad val."

Hildie baklei teen haar trane. "Ek's bly julle het gekom."

"Ons sou dit vir niks in die wêreld misgeloop het nie." Pappa gee haar 'n stywe drukkie. "Onthou om te bid en jou Bybel te lees." Hy klop haar op die rug en laat haar gaan.

"Ek sal, Pappa." Sy vou haar arms om Mamma en gee haar 'n drukkie. "Dankie dat julle gekom het. Dit het baie vir my beteken." Sy voel Mamma se hand op haar rug voordat sy haar uit Hildemara se omhelsing losmaak.

"Jy het dit gedoen, Hildemara Rose." Haar glimlag lyk 'n bietjie hartseer. "Ek hoop dat hierdie lewe wat jy gekies het, jou gelukkig maak."

Hildie leun vorentoe en soen Mamma op die wang. "Ek gaan dit seker nou binnekort uitvind."

* * *

*Liewe Rosie*

*Hildemara Rose is nou 'n gekwalifiseerde verpleegster. Sy was die beste student in haar klas en het die voorreg gehad om die prosessie te lei. En in haar wit uniform en blou mantel sy het inderdaad soos Florence Nightingale gelyk. My dogter het so regop en fier gestaan! Ek*

*kon haar op 'n slagveld met haar lamp sien staan om vir die gewondes hoop te bring.*

*Sy is nie meer my tingerige kind nie. My dogter ken haar plek in die wêreld. Ek is so trots op haar, Rosie. Die aand sou volmaak gewees het as dit nie vir die spreker was nie, 'n langdradige dokter wat nie van die podium wou afklim nie. Ek het 'n vreeslike hoofpyn gehad en dit was moeilik om te konsentreer op wat hy te sê gehad het. En toe het die samedromming van mense die pyn erger gemaak.*

*Ek wou vir Hildemara sê hoe trots sy my gemaak het, maar ek kon nie die woorde uitkry nie. Niclas het namens ons albei gepraat. Ek het gevra of sy huis toe kom in die hoop dat ek die geleentheid sou hê om met haar te gesels, maar sy is alreeds deur die Merritt-hospitaal aangestel. Teen die tyd dat jy hierdie brief kry, sal sy al geruime tyd in diens wees. Nie net dit nie. Sy en haar vriendin, Jasia Boutacoff, gaan saam in 'n huis bly. Sy is nou 'n vrou met 'n lewe van haar eie.*

* * *

'n Week nadat sy by die Merritt se verpleegpersoneel aangesluit het, neem Hildemara haar intrek by Boots. Die huis is nie ver van die hospitaal af nie en sy loop elke dag werk toe. Die plek voel soos 'n paleis ná die klein koshuiskamer, en stil na die rusteloosheid van die slaapstoep wat sy met dosyne verpleegsters gedeel het. Die huis het egter 'n paar nadele: 'n groot erf wat versorging nodig het en 'n groot, vrugdraende suurlemoenboom. Meneer Holmes, hulle buurman, sê die vorige huurder het spykers in die bas ingekap in die hoop om die boom dood te maak. "Dit moes die boom 'n hupstoot van een of ander aard gegee het!" Hildie tel elke week sakke suurlemoene op en gaan gee hulle by die hospitaalkombuis in.

"Ons moet iets aan die erf doen," sug Hildie. "Ons huis gaan die slegste in die buurt lyk."

"Wie gee om? Dis die eienaar se probleem, nie ons s'n nie. Hy het gesê hy sal dit kom doen wanneer hy tyd het."

Die eienaar kom net wanneer hy sy huur kom haal, en teen daardie tyd het Hildie en Boots ontdek dat die dak lek en die kombuiswasbak aanhoudend verstop is. Meneer Dawson sê hy sal iemand stuur om dit te kom regmaak.

"Die perde gaan horings kry voordat hy dit gaan kom regmaak." Boots vra 'n vriend om dit te kom doen en stuur die rekening vir die

eienaar. Toe hy nie betaal nie, trek sy dit van die volgende maand se huur af. Toe meneer Dawson kla, ontmoet hy en Boots mekaar op die grasperk.

Die bure kom uit om te luister. Boots roep meneer Holmes as getuie dat meneer Dawson ingestem het dat sy ’n deel van die huur vir herstelwerk kan aftrek. Toe sy inkom, klap sy haar hande asof om die man af te stof. Hildie lag. “Jy herinner my aan Mamma!”

Uiteindelik, erg verleë oor die toestand van die voortuin, gaan hoor Hildie by meneer Holmes of sy nie sy grassnyer en tuinskêr kan leen nie. Sy onthou hoe min Pappa gedink het van mense wat “hulle grond laat gaan”, en wil nie ’n seer oog in die woonbuurt wees nie.

“Jammer.” Meneer Holmes skud sy kop. “Ek leen nie my gereedskap uit nie, juffrou Waltert. Ek het op die harde manier geleer dat mense dit nie terugbring nie.”

“Ek sou ’n grassnyer en skêr gekoop het as ek kon, maar ek het nie die geld nie.”

“Wat doen jy vir ’n lewe?”

“Ons is albei verpleegsters by die Merritt.”

Hy tuur oor die heining na hulle erf, vryf oor sy ken en skud sy kop. “Is nogal ’n gemors. Sê jou wat. Ek het ’n ou grassnyer onder die huis. Ek sal die lemme skerp maak en haar bietjie olie, dan kan julle haar kry. Julle kan my vrou se ou skêr sommer ook vat. Dis duidelik dat hierdie plek van julle werk nodig het. Hoeveel vra Dawson julle per maand?” Toe Hildie vir hom sê, fluit hy sag. “Geen wonder julle het niks oor nie.”

Die volgende Saterdag bring meneer Holmes die grassnyer en skêr. “Vlymskerp en so goed soos nuut.”

’n Uur later sit Hildie op die stoeptrappies en rus. Meneer Holmes loer oor die heining en vra hoe die grassnyer loop. “Hy werk goed, meneer Holmes, maar ek moes eintlik gevra het of u ’n sekel het.” Hildie vee die sweet van haar voorkop af.

Hy lag. “Dit lyk beter as vroeër.”

“Dankie vir die grassnyer en skêr, meneer Holmes. Ek sal gereeld ’n mandjie suurlemoene oorstuur.”

“Noem my, George. En wat die suurlemoene betref, ek pluk alreeds dié aan die takke wat oor my heining hang.”

## Chapter 32

**1939**

*Germany Invades Poland*

Hildemara read the headline over morning coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs. Boots shuffled in, wearing her slippers and robe, still bleary-eyed from her date the night before.

"Oh, my head." Boots groaned, sliding cautiously onto a chair across the table. "I don't even know what time I got in last night."

"After two in the morning."

"No wonder I feel like a truck ran over me."

Hildie folded the paper back to read the second-page continuation. "Have you seen this?"

Boots rubbed her temples. "Heard it on the radio last night."

Papa had worried about this kind of thing happening. German relatives had written glowing letters about the meteoric rise of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Papa said a man with such messianic charisma might prove to be a devil in disguise. Mama thought the Great War would end all wars in Europe. Papa said man's nature never changes.

Boots made a dismissive gesture. "I hope America stays out of it." Apparently she had other things on her mind besides what was happening in Europe. "I saw a new guy in the cafeteria yesterday." She raked her fingers through her curly black hair. "Good-looking, tall, great body, nice eyes, a smile to make a girl's knees wobble."

Hildie looked up from the paper. "Did you make a date with him?"

"Nope. He's an orderly. I only go after doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs. You might like him, though."

Hildie just looked at her. They'd had this discussion before. Boots accused her of becoming a social outcast. Hildie said she had enough of a social life with the nurses and her patients at work.

"Flo, you're going to become like Miss Brown."

"And what's wrong with Miss Brown?"

Boots stood, shaking her head. "Gotta get ready." She opened the bedroom door and turned back to Hildie. "I'm going out after work. Don't wait up for me."

Hildie laughed. "I never do." She had the house to herself more than she had expected, especially when it came to yard work and doing dishes. She didn't mind the quiet. When she had a day off, she

slept in, caught up on laundry, housekeeping, and yard work. She kept up correspondence with Cloe, who had moved to Los Angeles, or wrote to Mama and Papa. Mama wrote back once a month, giving a chronology of what had happened on the farm. When Hildie had Sunday off, she went to church.

Hildie was sitting in the cafeteria the next evening, finishing her supper and thinking about Boots and her comment about Miss Brown, when she felt someone looking at her. She glanced up and saw a young man standing in line, waiting for the cook to hand him his dinner. He fit Boots's description of the "new guy" she'd seen. When he smiled at her, Hildie looked down quickly. Flustered, she picked up her tray, dumped the contents, and left the cafeteria.

The next day when she came on the ward, she saw him helping lift one of her patients from bed to gurney for transporting him to surgery. He had an athletic build like Bernie. Football player? When he smiled at her again, she felt herself blush. Embarrassed, she looked away quickly and busied herself with paperwork at the nurses' station. She kept her eyes down as he went by with her patient.

As she stood in line for lunch, someone came up behind her. "I saw you on the medical ward this morning."

She glanced at him and returned her attention to the cafeteria menu. Picking up her order, she headed for a table in the far corner of the room, where she could be alone. As much as she laughed over Boots's disdain for orderlies, she knew there was an unspoken rule about nurses fraternizing with them. What was it the General had said? *"Laborers work with hands. Professionals work with hands, head, and heart."*

"Mind if I sit with you?" When Hildie just stared, openmouthed, he set his tray down and took the seat opposite hers. "Is there an unspoken rule around here that a nurse can't say more than three words to an orderly?"

Did he read minds? "No."

"One word. Hardly an improvement."

His smile did odd things to her insides. "I don't usually strike up conversations with people I don't know. I only saw you yesterday for the first time."

"That's better." He grinned, which made her heart do flips and flutters. "I'm a junior at UC Berkeley with eyes on medical school. I thought it might be a good idea to work in a hospital and get a different view on my future career."

"Good for you."

"I'm working in the psych ward for the next month."

"I hear it can be a real riot in there."

He laughed. "Good one." He was even more handsome and appealing when he laughed.

"I wasn't joking."

"Oh." He looked at her, really looked this time, and she could feel the heat coming up again, along with tingles and other feelings she had never had before that made her feel vulnerable. "Miss Waltert." He held out his hand, a big strong hand like Bernie's only without the calluses. "I'm Cale Arundel, but my friends call me Trip." When his fingers closed around hers, heat surged through her. She pulled her hand away.

"Do you like movies, Miss Waltert?"

"Who doesn't?"

"How about Friday night?"

She glanced up sharply. "Are you asking me for a date?"

"You look surprised. Yes, I'm asking you for a date."

She looked around, disturbed by his attention. She had never been asked out by a boy, let alone a man. Why would someone like Cale Arundel be interested in her? "I'm on duty."

"When are you off duty?"

"I'd have to check the schedule."

He crossed his forearms on the table and leaned forward, gazing at her with faint amusement. "Is it because I'm a lowly orderly that you hesitate?"

"I don't know you."

"I don't know you either, but I'd like the opportunity to get to know you. Hence, the invitation."

She looked at her watch. "I need to get back. Excuse me." She grabbed her tray, dumped the contents in the garbage can near the door, and left the tray on top. Her heartbeat didn't slow until she returned to the medical ward.

"What happened to you?" one of the nurses asked.

"Nothing. Why? Am I late?"

"No. You just look a little flushed and excited about something."

Cale Arundel came on her ward later that afternoon. The moment she spotted him, she grabbed a clipboard and ducked into the linen closet to check off the list of sheets, pillowcases, towels, and washcloths. One of the nurses peered in. "Someone's waiting for you

at the nurses' station."

Cale walked toward her. "I came for an aspirin."

"An aspirin?" Nurses sat, heads together, whispering and grinning at her. She glared at Cale. "You came all the way here from the psych ward to find an aspirin?"

"I didn't think you'd loan me a straitjacket."

She didn't smile. She looked pointedly at the other nurses and then back at him. Maybe he'd get the hint and stop providing grist for the gossip mill. He noticed, too, but shrugged it off. "People talk. So what?"

*So what?* It was her reputation at stake. Embarrassed, angry, she headed down the hallway. He followed. When she stopped out of sight of the other nurses, he stepped in front of her. "You look ready to shoot me, Miss Waltert."

"Why are you here?"

"Why do you think?"

"I have no idea!"

"I checked your schedule. You're off on Friday. I'd like to take you to dinner and a movie."

No one had ever asked her out, and the thought of this handsome young man, orderly or not, being interested in her seemed beyond comprehension. "I have no intention of being the brunt of someone's idea of a joke."

"Why would I joke about it?"

"No!"

"How do you know I'm not husband material unless you get to know me first?"

She blanched. "What did you say?"

"Boots said you wouldn't go out with anyone unless he was husband material."

"I'll kill her." Hildemara felt her face go hot. "And I'm supposed to believe you're looking for a wife?"

"I never gave it much thought until two days ago, at 12:15 to be exact, when you walked into the cafeteria."

Did he really think she'd believe such hogwash? "I'll put out the word, Mr. Arundel. You'll have women lined up and on their knees begging."

He leaned so close that she could smell his aftershave. "Keep it to yourself. I'm not interested in anyone else. Dinner and a movie. I promise I won't lay a finger on you, if that's what worries you." He

raised his hand in solemn vow. “I swear I’m a gentleman.”

“If you aren’t, I have a big brother who’ll beat the living tar out of you.”

He laughed. “I take that as a yes. Friday. Six o’clock sharp.” He shoved the swinging doors open and walked through. “See you then.”

“Wait a minute!”

A patient buzzer went off. She pushed the doors open, but Cale had already gone into the stairwell. Frustrated, she hurried back down the hall. She’d only make matters worse by tracking him down in the hospital.

*Boots!* She’d tell her roommate to give him a message.

“Nothing doing.” Boots shook her head. “You want to break a date, you do it yourself.”

She watched for him in the cafeteria, hoping for a chance to tell him she’d changed her mind. She didn’t see him for the next three days. She comforted herself with the fact that he didn’t have her address. He couldn’t come and pick her up if he didn’t know where she lived.

“He’s cute. And you haven’t had a date since I’ve known you.” Boots was scrambling eggs in the small kitchen. “Go out. Have fun.” She clicked her tongue and winked. “Try not to behave.”

Hildemara didn’t see Cale at all that week. On Friday, she fretted about what to do. Maybe he wouldn’t show up. But then that would be even more humiliating!

“Will you settle down, Flo? You’re jumpy as a grasshopper.”

“What was I thinking? I don’t even know the guy.”

“That’s why you go out with him. So you can get to know him. Let me know if he’s a good kisser.”

“You’re not funny, Boots!”

She laughed. “It’s so much fun teasing you.”

Hildie sat on the beige sofa she and Boots had bought secondhand and plucked at the skirt of her navy blue dress. She got up again. “This is crazy.” She saw a black Model T Ford pull up and park in front of the house. “Oh no, he’s here. I can’t do this, Boots.”

“No getting out of it now.” Boots bounced over, knelt on the couch, and peered out through the curtains. “Holy cow! Red roses! This guy is serious. And a car! And I thought he was an orderly.”

Hildie slapped her hands away from the curtain. “Will you stop? He’ll see you! He is an orderly. He’s a student at UC Berkeley majoring in medicine.” She felt a twinge of something uncomfortable watching

Boots watch him. “Why don’t *you* go out with him?”

Boots laughed. “He’s at the door, Hildie. Open up. Let him in.”

They went to Lupe’s on East Fourteenth Street. Over the next hour, Hildie found out Cale Arundel preferred the nickname Trip; he grew up in Colorado Springs; his father drove a city bus; his mother played piano for the Presbyterian church next door; he liked skiing, fishing, and hiking; and he’d spent three years at the University of Colorado in Denver. “I transferred to Berkeley because it’s one of the top universities in the country.”

Exactly what Mama had said. “Why transfer so late?”

“Didn’t have the grades to get in freshman year, and even if I had, I would’ve had to pay out-of-state tuition. Transferring senior year isn’t the smartest decision I’ve ever made. I lost some credits coming here, but I wanted UCB on my diploma, and I hope to do my internship in San Francisco.”

“Why are you called Trip?”

He laughed. “I can thank my father for that. He said I tripped over my feet until I grew into them.” He held up his hands. “Enough about me. I want to know about you.”

Hildie didn’t know what to say to make her life sound the least bit interesting. Thankfully, the waitress brought their spaghetti. Trip put his hand out to take hers. “Mind if we pray?” She put her hand in his as he said grace. He squeezed her hand lightly before letting it go. “Last thing I’ll say about myself—God matters. I go to church every Sunday. I hear you’re a praying girl. Now, it’s your turn to talk.” He stabbed his fork into his spaghetti.

Stomach fluttering, Hildie twirled spaghetti on a fork, wishing she had ordered something easier to eat. “My parents are farmers in Murietta, almonds and raisins. I have an older brother and two younger sisters. Bernie went to college in Sacramento. He’s married to my best friend, Elizabeth. My younger sister, Cloe, is going to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. She intends to design costumes for the movies. Rikka, the youngest, is a talented artist, still in high school. When I graduated from high school, I came up to train at Samuel Merritt Nursing School. When the administrator asked if I’d stay, I said yes. End of story.”

Trip gave her a lopsided smile. “I doubt that.” He set his fork down and studied her.

She picked up her napkin. “Do I have spaghetti sauce on my chin?”

“No, but you have a nice chin.” He picked up his fork again. “Sorry. I like looking at you.”

No one had ever said that to her before.

Trip took her to *Drums Along the Mohawk* with Henry Fonda and Claudette Colbert. He kept his word and didn’t touch her, not even once. When the movie ended, he drove her straight back to the house, walked her to the door, said he’d had a great time, and wished her a good night.

She took the hint and retreated into the house, leaving the porch light on until he got into his car. She watched through the curtains as Trip Arundel drove away. *Well, that’s that.* She plunked down on the sofa and stared at the wall.

She had had the best time of her life, but thought she must have bored Trip to death. He couldn’t get away fast enough. Changing into flannel pajamas, she tried to read. Distracted, she went to bed and lay awake until Boots came home at three in the morning. “You don’t have to tiptoe.”

“You’re still awake?” Boots’s voice slurred slightly. “Have a good time?”

“Sounds like you did.”

Boots stood in the doorway. “A little tipsy, tha’s all. He took me dancing and then to some party. So? How did you like Trip? Nice guy, isn’t he.”

“Yes. He’s nice.” It seemed a harmless enough thing to say to her inebriated friend. In truth, she had liked him entirely too much. She had felt the loss of him when he said good night. “I don’t expect to hear from him again.”

“Too bad.” Boots waved her hand. “I’m going to hit the hay before I end up on the floor. Nigh’ night.”

Trip called the next day. “How about an ice cream at Eddy’s?”

And the evening after that. “It’s a nice evening for a walk around Lake Merritt.”

When he didn’t call on Monday, Hildemara felt the hint of heartbreak coming on. How could she have allowed herself to fall for someone so fast?

When he called the next day and asked her to dinner and another movie, she declined.

“Sunday, then. Church?”

“I don’t know my schedule yet. I may put in for extra shifts.”

Trip didn’t press.

Boots came home early. “Why are you crying? Did that guy do something . . . ?”

“No. He didn’t do anything. Nothing’s wrong.”

Boots sat on the sofa. “He hasn’t asked you out again. Is that it?”

“He did ask me out.”

Boots shook her head. “So what’s the problem?”

“I’m not going out with him again.”

“Why not? You like him. He likes you. Put two and two together and—”

“And I end up with a broken heart. Trip could have any girl he wants, Boots. He’s gorgeous. He’s going to UCB. He’s going to be a doctor. That should make even you sit up and take notice.”

Boots gave Hildie a hard push. “Next time he asks, say yes.”

Next time he asked, Hildie thought up another lame excuse to say no. “I have to study for the state board exam.” She wanted to keep a distance rather than let herself hope.

The day after she received the good news that she’d passed and now qualified as a registered nurse, Trip showed up on the medical ward with a bouquet of daisies he’d probably bought from the hospital gift shop. “Congratulations!”

She took the bouquet and set it on the nurses’ station counter. “How did you know?”

“Boots told me. You aren’t on shift tonight and you don’t have to study. Let me take you out so we can celebrate.” He said it loudly enough for three nurses to overhear, even if they hadn’t been eavesdropping. Hildemara blushed and stepped away from the others, moving farther down the hall.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

He frowned. “Did I do something to offend you?”

“No.”

“Why do you keep saying no, Hildemara?”

“Mr. Arundel!” Jones beckoned him down the hall. They spoke in low voices. Without looking at her, Trip strode down the hall and disappeared through the swinging doors. Feeling a lump growing in her throat, Hildie went to check on her patients. When she came back to the nurses’ station, Jones looked up at her. “You’re fighting a losing battle, Hildemara.”

Trip showed up in the cafeteria a few days later. Hildemara grabbed her tray and retreated to a table behind a potted palm. Trip gave his order, waited for it, and crossed the room. He set his tray on

the table, but didn't sit. "Boots said you probably wouldn't trust me unless I had references. So . . ." He reached into his pocket, took out three envelopes, and slid them across the table. "Just so you'll know I'm not the wolf waiting to devour Little Red Riding Hood." He took his tray and left.

Annoyed, she tore open the envelopes. One letter came from Trip's pastor claiming Trip was a morally upright young man who attended church every Sunday. Another came from the head nurse of the psych ward, far more serious in tone, commending Mr. Arundel for hard work, intelligence, and compassion. The third was in the form of a petition: *All the undersigned concur that Miss Hildemara Waltert, more commonly known as Flo, should go out with Mr. Cale Arundel, commonly known as Trip, of Colorado Springs, a most honorable young man.* Signatures followed, with Jasia Boutacoff at the top and twenty-two other nurses' names below hers, including Miss Brown and Miss Jones!

Cheeks flaming, she folded the letters and stuffed them into her uniform pocket. She tried to eat her lunch, but felt the amused glances of several whose names were on the list. Trip sat alone across the room. He ate quickly, dumped his garbage, and came back to her table. Sliding a chair out, he turned it around and straddled it. Folding his arms on the back, he looked at her. "We had a great time, didn't we? Or was I deluding myself? I have been working on the psych ward, after all."

"Trip . . ."

"You know, it would be easier to marry you first and then ask you out."

"Don't make fun of me, please."

"I saw you before you ever saw me, Hildie. You were praying with one of your patients. I thought you were the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. I asked around about you. I liked what people had to say."

"You asked about me?"

He grimaced in apology. "Boots has a reputation. I wanted to know if her roommate plays the field like she does. I wanted to know a little more about you before I made a move." He smiled slightly. "I think you feel something for me or you wouldn't be running so scared. I'd like to spend more time with you, get to know you better, have you get to know me." He rose and turned the chair around. "Your decision." He pushed the chair under the table. "You tell me no again, and I'll take it as no." He gave her a rueful smile, his gaze caressing her face. "I'm praying you say yes." He walked away.

When she got off work, he was waiting outside the medical ward. She took the stairs instead of the elevator. He kept up with her. “So?”

“Yes.”

He flashed a smile at her. “Good.”

She stopped on the landing. Maybe he wasn’t the Casanova she had first thought, but that didn’t mean that this relationship would come to anything. He might take her out a few more times and realize she was the most boring girl he’d ever met and wonder why he’d bothered in the first place.

He was right: she was scared. She was already halfway to being in love with him. She needed to say something, but couldn’t think of anything that wouldn’t expose her feelings.

Trip stepped closer. He took her hand and wove his fingers through hers. “Don’t worry so much, Hildemara Waltert. We’ll take it one step at a time and see where this takes us.”

And so they did for the next six months, until Mama called and said she needed Hildemara to come home right away. “Your father has cancer.”

# Hoofstuk 32

## 1939

*Duitsland val Pole in*

Hildemara lees die hoofopskrif waar sy met haar oggendkoffie en 'n bord roereier voor haar sit. Boots kom in haar pantoffels die kamer ingeslof, haar oë steeds glasig van haar afspraak die vorige aand.

"My kop," kreun Boots en sak versigtig op die stoel oorkant Hildie neer. "Ek weet nie eens hoe laat ek ingekom het nie."

"Dit was ná twee vanoggend."

"Geen wonder dit voel asof 'n trein my getref het nie."

Hildie blaai om om die res van die berig op die tweede bladsy verder te lees. "Het jy dit gesien?"

Boots masseer haar slape. "Ek het dit gisteraand oor die radio gehoor."

Pappa was bekommerd dat so iets sou gebeur. Sy familie in Duitsland het swymelend geskryf oor die meteoriese opkoms van Adolf Hitler en die Nasionale Sosialistiese Duitse Arbeidersparty. Pappa sê dat 'n man met soveel messiaanse charisma soms 'n duiwel vermom as 'n engel kan wees. Mamma het gedink die Groot Oorlog sou 'n einde aan alle oorloë in Europa maak. Pappa sê dat die menslike natuur nooit verander nie.

Boots maak dit af met 'n gebaar. "Ek hoop Amerika hou hulle daaruit." Sy is klaarblyklik nie nou lus om haar met Europese gebeure moeg te maak nie. "Ek het gister 'n nuwe ou in die kafeteria gesien." Sy trek haar vingers deur haar krullerige swart hare. "Aantreklik, lank, goed gebou, mooi oë, 'n glimlag wat 'n mens se mond laat water."

Hildie kyk op van die koerant. "Het jy 'n afspraak uit hom gekry?"

"Nee. Hy's 'n portier. Ek gaan net vir dokters, prokureurs en Indiaanse opperhoofde. Maar jy sal dalk van hom hou."

Hildie kyk net na haar. Dit is nie die eerste keer dat hulle hierdie gesprek het nie. Boots beskuldig haar dat sy besig is om 'n sosiale uitgeworpene te word. Hildie sê dat sy genoeg van 'n sosiale lewe met

die verpleegsters en haar pasiënte by die werk het.

"Flo, jy gaan soos suster Brown word."

"En wat's fout met suster Brown?"

Boots staan op en skud haar kop. "Ek moet klaarmaak." Sy maak die kamerdeur oop en draai om na Hildie. "Ek gaan uit na werk. Moenie vir my wag nie."

Hildie lag. "Ek doen dit nooit nie." Sy het die huis meer vir haarself as wat sy verwag het, veral wat die tuinwerk en skottelgoed betref. Die stilte pla haar nie. Wanneer sy 'n dag vry het, slaap sy laat en takel sy die wasgoed, huiswerk en tuinwerk. Sy skryf vir Cloe wat nou in Los Angeles is of vir Mamma en Pappa. Mamma skryf een keer 'n maand om haar op hoogte te bring van wat op die plaas gebeur. Wanneer Hildie 'n Sondag vry het, gaan sy kerk toe.

Hildie is die volgende aand in die kafeteria besig om klaar te eet, en Boots se opmerking oor suster Brown draai nog in haar agterkop toe sy iemand se oë op haar voel. Sy kyk op en sien 'n jong man wat staan en wag dat die kok sy kos vir hom moet gee. Hy pas by Boots se beskrywing van die "nuwe ou" wat sy gesien het. Toe hy vir haar glimlag, kyk Hildie vinnig af. Sy tel haar skinkbord op, gooi die inhoud in die vullisblik en verlaat die kafeteria.

Toe sy die volgende dag aan diens kom, is hy besig om een van haar pasiënte wat teater toe moet gaan, op 'n trollie oor te tel. Hy is atleties gebou soos Bernie. Voetbalspeler? Toe hy weer vir haar glimlag, voel sy hoe sy bloos. Sy kyk verleë weg en hou haar besig met haar papierwerk by die diensstasie. Sy hou haar oë afgewend toe hy haar pasiënt verby stoot.

Toe sy vir middagete in die ry staan, hoor sy iemand agter haar praat. "Ek het jou vanoggend in die mediese saal gesien."

Sy kyk na hom voordat sy haar aandag weer by die kafeteriaspyskaart bepaal. Nadat sy haar kos gekry het, loop sy na een van die tafels in die hoek van die vertrek waar sy alleen kan wees. Hoe sy ook al vir Boots se afkeer in portiere lag, weet sy dat daar 'n ongeskrewe reël oor verpleegsters se omgang met hulle is. Wat het die Generaal nou weer gesê? "*Arbeiders werk met hulle hande. Professionele persone werk met hulle hande, hart en verstand.*"

"Gee jy om as ek by jou sit?" Toe Hildie hom net oopmond aankyk, sit hy sy skinkbord neer en neem oorkant haar plaas. "Is daar 'n onuitgesproke reël hier dat 'n verpleegster nie meer as drie woorde vir 'n portier mag sê nie?"

Kan hy gedagtes lees? "Nee."

"Dis een woord. Nie juis 'n verbetering nie."

Sy glimlag doen vreemde dinge aan haar binnekant. "Ek gesels gewoonlik nie met mense wat ek nie ken nie. Ek het jou gister vir die eerste keer gesien."

"Dis beter." Hy grinnik en haar hart wip en fladder. "Ek's by Berkeley en hoop om uiteindelik medies te swot. Ek het gedink dis dalk 'n goeie idee om in 'n hospitaal te kom werk en 'n ander perspektief op my toekomstige loopbaan te kry."

"Klink goed."

"Ek werk vir die volgende maand in die psigiatriese saal."

"Ek hoor dit kan dol gaan daar."

Hy lag. "Goeie een." Hy is selfs nog aantrekliker wanneer hy lag.

"Ek maak nie 'n grap nie."

"O."

Hy kyk na haar, hierdie keer om regtig te kyk, en sy voel hoe die warmte opnuut oor haar kruip, tesame met 'n tinteling en ander gevoelens wat sy nog nooit gehad het nie en wat haar weerloos laat voel. "Juffrou Waltert." Hy hou sy hand uit, 'n groot sterk hand soos dié van Bernie, net sonder die eelte. "Ek's Cale Arundel, maar my vriende noem my Trip." Toe sy vingers om hare sluit, versprei die hitte deur haar hele lyf. Sy neem haar hand weg.

"Hou jy van fliek, juffrou Waltert?"

"Wie hou nie daarvan nie?"

"Wat van Vrydagaand?"

Sy kyk skerp op. "Vra jy my uit?"

"Jy lyk verras. Ja, ek vra jou om saam met my uit te gaan."

Sy kyk om, gesteurd deur sy aandag. Sy is nog nooit deur 'n seun uitgevra nie, laat staan nog 'n man. Hoekom sou iemand soos Cale Arundel in haar belangstel? "Ek's aan diens."

"Wanneer is jy van diens af?"

"Ek sal moet gaan kyk."

Hy kruis sy voorarms op die tafel en leun vooroor om effens geamuseerd na haar te kyk. "Is dit omdat ek 'n portier is dat jy huiwer?"

"Ek ken jou nie."

"Ek ken jou ook nie, maar ek wil die geleentheid hê om jou te leer ken. Daarom die uitnodiging."

Sy kyk op haar horlosie. "Ek moet teruggaan. Verskoon my." Sy raap haar skinkbord op, gooi die inhoud in die asblik naby die deur en los die skinkbord bo-op. Haar hartklop kom eers tot bedaring toe sy

haar saal bereik.

“Wat het met jou gebeur?” vra een van die verpleegsters.

“Niks nie. Hoekom? Is ek laat?”

“Nee. Jou wange is net ’n bietjie rooi en jy lyk opgewonde oor iets.”

Cale Arundel daag later die middag by haar saal op. Die oomblik toe sy hom sien, gryp sy ’n knyperbord en duik by die linnekas in om die lys lakens, kussingslope, handdoeke en waslappe na te gaan. Een van die verpleegsters loer om die deur. “Hier is iemand vir jou by die diensstasie.”

Cale loop na haar toe. “Ek wil graag ’n hoofpynpil hê.”

“’n Hoofpynpil?” Die verpleegsters fluister onderlangs en grinnik vir haar. Sy gluur Cale aan. “Het jy al die pad van die psigiatriese saal vir ’n hoofpynpil gekom?”

“Ek’t nogal gedink dis ’n heel aanvaarbare motivering.”

Sy beantwoord nie sy glimlag nie. Sy kyk veelbetekenend na die ander verpleegsters en dan weer na hom. Hopelik vang hy die skimp en hou op om die plaaslike skinderblad van sappige brokkies te voorsien. Hy merk dit ook, maar maak dit skouerophalend af. “Mense praat. Wat daarvan?”

*Wat daarvan?* Haar reputasie is op die spel. Sy is skaam en kwaad toe sy in die gang af koers kry. Hy loop agter haar aan. Toe sy buite sig van die ander vassteek, kom hy voor haar staan. “Jy lyk asof jy my wil skiet, juffrou Waltert.”

“Hoekom is jy hier?”

“Hoekom dink jy?”

“Ek het nie die vaagste benul nie!”

“Ek het na jou rooster gaan kyk. Jy werk nie Vrydagaand nie. Ek sal jou graag wil uitneem vir ete en dan gaan fliek.”

Sy is nog nooit uitgevra nie, en die gedagte dat hierdie aantreklike jongman, portier ofte nie, in haar belangstel, gaan haar verstand te bowe. “Ek is nie van plan om die voorwerp van iemand se idee van ’n grap te wees nie.”

“Hoekom sou ek daaroor ’n grap maak?”

“Ek het geen idee nie!”

“Hoe sal jy weet dat ek nie troumateriaal is tensy jy my eers leer ken nie?”

Sy verbleek. “Wat sê jy?”

“Boots sê jy sal nie met iemand uitgaan as hy nie troumateriaal is nie.”

“Ek gaan haar vermoor.” Hildemara voel hoe haar wange warm

word. “En is ek veronderstel om te glo dat jy ’n vrou soek?”

“Ek het nie eintlik daaraan gedink totdat ek jou twee dae gelede, om 12:15 om presies te wees, by die kafeteria sien inkom het nie.”

Dink hy regtig dat sy sulke nonsens sal glo? “Ek sal die woord versprei, meneer Arundel. Die meisies sal in rye staan en smeek.”

Hy leun tot so naby dat sy sy naskeermiddel kan ruik. “Moet dit nie doen nie. Ek stel in niemand anders belang nie. Ete en ’n fliek. Ek belowe ek sal nie aan jou raak nie – as dit is wat jou bekommer.” Hy lig sy hand asof hy ’n plegtige eed aflê. “Ek belowe jou ek’s ’n gentleman.”

“As jy nie is nie, ek het ’n ouer broer wat jou sal disnis slaan.”

Hy lag. “Ek neem aan dis ’n ja. Vrydag. Op die kop sesuur.” Hy stoot die swaaideure oop en mik buitentoe. “Sien jou dan.”

“Wag ’n oomblik!”

Een van die pasiënte druk ’n klokkie. Sy stoot die deure oop, maar Cale is alreeds met die trappe af. Gefrustreerd haas sy haar terug na die diensstasie. Sy sal sake net vererger as sy nou deur die hospitaal agter hom aandraf.

*Boots!* Sy sal haar huismaat aansê om hom die boodskap te gee.

“Buite die kwessie.” Boots skud haar kop. “As jy ’n afspraak wil kanselleer, moet jy dit self doen.”

Later kyk sy of sy hom in die kafeteria sien om vir hom te sê dat sy van plan verander het. Die volgende drie dae sien sy hom glad nie. Sy troos haarself met die feit dat hy nie haar adres het nie. Hy kan haar nie kom oplaai as hy nie weet waar sy bly nie.

“Hy’s oulik. En vandat ek jou ken, het jy nog nooit op ’n afspraak gegaan nie.” Boots is in die klein kombuisie besig om roereier te maak. “Gaan uit. Geniet dit.” Sy klik met haar tong en knipoog. “Probeer om jouself nie te gedra nie.”

Hildemara sien Cale daardie week nie met ’n oog nie. Teen Vrydag bekommer sy haar oor wat om te doen. Dalk daag hy nie eens op nie. Maar dit sal haar vernedering net nog groter maak!

“Kom tog tot ruste, Flo. Jy’s so op en af soos ’n sprinkaan!”

“Wat het ek gedink? Ek ken hom van g’n kant af nie.”

“Dis hoekom jy met hom uitgaan. Sodat jy hom kan léér ken. Laat weet my of hy kan soen.”

“Jy’s nie snaaks nie, Boots!”

Sy lag. “Dis so lekker om jou te terg.”

Hildie gaan sit op die punt van die bank wat sy en Boots tweedehands gekoop het en trek aan haar vlootblou rok. Sy staan

weer op. “Dis malligheid.” Dan sien sy ’n swart Model T Ford voor die huis stilhou. “Ag nee, hy is hier. Ek kan dit nie doen nie, Boots.”

“Dis nou te laat vir kop uittrek.” Boots spring op, kniel op die bank en loer deur die gordyne. “Goeie genade! Rooi rose! Hierdie ou is ernstig. En ’n kar! En ek het gedink hy is ’n portier.”

Hildie klap haar hande weg van die gordyn. “Sal jy ophou? Hy gaan jou sien! Hy is nie ’n portier nie. Hy’s ’n mediese student by Berkeley.” Sy ervaar iets ongemakliks as sy sien hoe Boots na hom kyk. “Hoekom gaan jý nie met hom uit nie?”

Boots lag. “Hy’s by die deur, Hildie. Gaan maak oop. Nooi hom in.”

Hulle gaan eet by Lupe’s in East Fourteenth straat. Gedurende die volgende uur vind Hildie uit dat Cale Arundel die naam Trip verkies; hy het in Colorado Springs grootgeword; sy pa bestuur ’n bus; sy ma speel klavier vir die plaaslike Presbiteriaanse Kerk; hy hou van ski, visvang en stap; en hy het drie jaar aan die Universiteit van Colorado in Denver studeer. “Ek het na Berkeley oorgeskakel omdat dit een van die beste universiteite in die land is.”

Presies wat Mamma gesê het. “Hoekom het jy nou eers hier kom studeer?”

“My punte was nie goed genoeg om in te kom nie. En selfs al was dit, kos dit baie om in ’n ander staat te studeer. Om in my seniorjaar oor te skakel was nie die slimste besluit wat ek al geneem het nie. Ek het van my krediete verloor, maar ek wou UCB op my sertifikaat hê en ek sal my internskap graag in San Francisco wil doen.”

“Hoekom word jy Trip genoem?”

Hy lag. “Dis te danke aan my pa. Hy sê ek het oor my voete geval totdat ek hulle ingegroei het.” Hy hou sy hande op. “Genoeg van my. Ek wil meer weet van jou.”

Hildie weet nie wat om te sê om haar lewe in die minste interessant te laat klink nie. Genadiglik bring die kelnerin hulle spaghetti. Trip hou sy hand na hare toe uit. “Gee jy om as ek bid?” Sy plaas haar hand in syne terwyl hy bid en hy gee hare ’n sagte drukkie voordat hy dit laat gaan. “Dis die laaste ding wat ek oor myself sal sê: Die Here is vir my belangrik. Ek gaan elke Sondag kerk toe. Boots vertel my jy ook. Nou is dit jou beurt om te praat.” Hy steek sy vurk in sy spaghetti.

Hildie se maag fladder terwyl sy die spaghetti om haar vurk draai. Sy wens sy het iets bestel wat makliker is om te eet. “My ouers boer in Murietta met amandels en rosyntjies. Ek het ’n ouer broer en twee jonger susters. Bernie het in Sacramento gaan studeer. Hy het met my

beste vriendin, Elizabeth, getrou. My jonger suster, Cloe, studeer aan die Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Sy wil filmkostuums ontwerp. Rikka, die jongste, is nog op skool en ’n talentvolle kunstenaar. Ná skool het ek reguit Samuel Merritt toe gekom om verpleegster te word. Toe die administrateur vra of ek wou aanbly, het ek ja gesê. Einde van die storie.”

Trip glimlag skeef. “Ek twyfel.” Hy sit sy vurk neer en kyk na haar.

Sy tel haar servet op. “Is daar spaghetti op my ken?”

“Nee, maar jy het ’n mooi ken.” Hy tel weer sy vurk op. “Jammer. Dis sommer net lekker om na jou te kyk.”

Dis die heel eerste keer dat iemand so iets vir haar sê.

Trip neem haar om *Drums Along the Mohawk* met Henry Fonda en Claudette Colbert te gaan kyk. Hy hou sy woord en raak nie aan haar nie, nie eens een maal nie. Toe die fliek klaarmaak, neem hy haar reguit huis toe, loop saam met haar tot by deur, sê dat hy ’n heerlike aand gehad het en groet.

Sy verstaan die skimp en gaan in. Sy los die stoeplig aan totdat hy in sy motor klim en kyk deur die venster hoe Trip Arundel wegry. *Wel, dis dan dit.* Sy val op die bank neer en staar na die muur.

Dit was die wonderlikste aand van haar lewe, maar sy het Trip waarskynlik tot die dood toe verveel. Hy kon nie vinnig genoeg wegkom nie. Sy gaan trek haar flennienagklere aan en probeer lees, maar kan nie konsentreer nie. Later gaan sy bed toe en lê wakker totdat Boots drie-uur die oggend inkom. “Jy hoef nie op jou tone te loop nie.”

“Is jy nog wakker?” Boots se tong sleep effens. “Het jy ’n lekker aand gehad?”

“Klink asof jy joune geniet het.”

Boots staan in die deur. “’n Bietjie vrolik, dis al. Ons het gaan dans en toe het hy my na ’n partytjie geneem. En? Hoe hou jy van Trip? Hy’s ’n oulike ou, nè?”

“Ja. Hy is oulik.” Dit is seker ’n heel veilige opmerking om teenoor haar aangeklamde vriendin te maak. Die feit is, sy het heeltemal te veel van hom gehou. Dit het gevoel asof sy iets verloor het toe hy wegry. “Ek dink nie ek gaan weer van hom hoor nie.”

“Jammer om te hoor.” Boots wuif haar hand. “Ek gaan in die bed val voordat ek op die vloer land. Lekker doeks.”

Trip bel die volgende dag. “Wat van ’n roomys by Eddy’s?”

En die aand daarna. “Dis so ’n mooi aand. Kom ons gaan stap langs die meer.”

Toe hy haar nie die Maandag bel nie, verbeel Hildemara haar dat sy 'n gebroke hart sien aankom. Hoe kon sy haarself toelaat om so vinnig vir iemand te val?

Toe hy die volgende dag bel om haar vir nog 'n ete en fliek te nooi, wys sy dit van die hand.

"Sondag, dan. Kerk?"

"Ek weet nog nie hoe my rooster lyk nie. Ek gaan dalk ekstra skofte insit."

Trip druk haar nie.

Boots kom vroeg huis toe. "Hoekom huil jy? Het daai ou iets aan jou gedoen ... ?"

"Nee. Hy het niks gedoen nie. Dis sommer niks."

Boots gaan sit op die bank. "Hy het jou nie weer uitgevra nie. Is dit wat dit is?"

"Hy het my uitgevra."

Boots skud haar kop. "Nou wat's die probleem?"

"Ek gaan nie weer met hom uit nie."

"Hoekom nie? Jy hou van hom. Hy hou van jou. Sit twee en twee bymekaar en – "

"En ek sit met 'n gebroke hart. Trip kan enige meisie kry wat hy wil hê, Boots. Hy's ongelooflik. Hy studeer aan UCB. Hy gaan 'n dokter wees. Dit behoort selfs vir jou iets te sê."

Boots gee Hildie 'n stamp. "As hy weer vra, sê ja."

Toe hy weer vra, dink Hildie weer 'n swak verskoning uit om nee te sê. "Ek moet vir die staatseksamen swot." Sy wil 'n afstand bewaar eerder as om haarself toe te laat om te hoop.

Die dag nadat sy gehoor het dat sy geslaag het en nou as 'n geregistreerde verpleegster kwalifiseer, daag Trip by haar saal op met 'n ruiker magrietjies wat hy waarskynlik by die hospitaal se geskenkwinkel gekoop het. "Veels geluk!"

Sy neem die ruiker en sit dit op die diensstasie se toonbank neer. "Hoe het jy geweet?"

"Boots het my gesê. Jy is nie vanaand aan diens nie en jy hoef nie te leer nie. Kom ek neem jou uit sodat ons dit kan vier." Hy sê dit so hard dat drie verpleegsters hoor sonder dat hulle probeer afluister. Hildemara bloos en loop 'n entjie van die ander af weg.

"Ek dink nie dis 'n goeie idee nie."

Hy frons. "Het ek iets gedoen om jou aanstoot te gee?"

"Nee."

"Hoekom bly jy nee sê, Hildemara?"

"Meneer Arundel!" Jones wink hom oor na haar toe. Hulle praat sag. Dan loop Trip sonder om weer na haar te kyk en verdwyn deur die swaaideure. Daar sit 'n knop in Hildemara se keel toe sy haar pasiënte gaan sien, en toe sy weer by die diensstasie aankom, kyk Jones op na haar. "Jy baklei verniet, Hildemara."

'n Paar dae later sien sy Trip in die kafeteria raak. Hildemara raap haar skinkbord op en gaan sit by 'n tafel agter 'n potplant. Trip plaas sy bestelling, wag vir sy kos en loop na haar toe. Hy sit sy skinkbord op die tafel neer, maar bly staan. "Boots sê jy gaan my waarskynlik nie vertrou tensy ek referente het nie. So ... " Hy haal drie koeverte uit sy sak en skuif hulle oor die tafel. "Net sodat jy weet dat ek nie 'n wolf is wat wag om klein Rooikappie te verslind nie." Hy neem sy skinkbord en loop.

Sy skeur die koeverte ergerlik oop. Die een brief kom van Trip se pastoor wat beweer dat Trip 'n moreel standvastige jong man is wat elke Sondag kerk toe kom. Die tweede, heelwat ernstiger, kom van die hoofverpleegster van die psigiatriese afdeling wat meneer Arundel se harde werk, intelligensie en deernis hoog aanskryf. Die derde is in die vorm van 'n petisie: *Al die ondergetekendes is dit eens dat juffrou Hildemara Waltert, beter bekend as Flo, met meneer Cale Arundel, algemeen bekend as Trip, van Colorado Springs, 'n hoogs eerbare jong man, moet uitgaan*. Handtekeninge volg, dié van Jasia Boutacoff en twee en twintig ander verpleegstersname, insluitend suster Brown en suster Jones!

Sy vou die briewe met vlammende wange op en druk hulle in haar sak. Sy probeer haar kos eet, maar voel die geamuseerde kyke van 'n paar van die ondergetekendes. Trip sit alleen aan die oorkant van die vertrek. Hy eet vinnig, gooi sy oorskiet in die asblik en kom weer na haar tafel toe. Hy trek 'n stoel uit, draai dit om en gaan sit wydsbeen daaroor. Met sy arms oor die rugleuning gevou kyk hy na haar. "Ons het mekaar se geselskap geniet. Of was dit net my verbeelding? Ek hét immers in die psigiatriese saal gewerk."

"Trip ... "

"Jy weet, dit sou makliker gewees het om eers met jou te trou en jou dan uit te vra."

"Moet my asseblief nie spot nie."

"Ek het jou gesien voordat jy my gesien het, Hildie. Jy het saam met een van jou pasiënte gebid. Ek het gedink jy is die mooiste meisie wat ek al ooit gesien het. Ek het oor jou uitgevra. Ek het gehou van wat die mense gesê het."

“Het jy oor my uitgevra?”

Hy gryns verskonend. “Boots het ’n reputasie. Ek wou weet of haar kamermaat ook so lief is vir kuier. Ek wou ’n bietjie meer van jou weet voordat ek toenadering soek.” Hy glimlag effens. “Ek dink jy voel iets vir my, anders sou jy nie so bang gewees het nie. Ek wil graag meer tyd saam met jou deurbring, jou beter leer ken, jou die kans gee om my beter te leer ken.” Hy staan op en draai die stoel om. “Jou besluit.” Hy stoot die stoel onder die tafel in. “As jy weer nee sê, sal ek dit as ’n nee aanvaar.” Hy gee haar ’n meewarige glimlag, sy blik liefkosend op haar gesig. “Ek bid dat jy sal ja sê.” Dan loop hy weg.

Toe sy van diens af gaan, wag hy buitekant die saal. Sy neem die trappe in plaas van die hysbak. Hy val langs haar in. “En?”

“Ja.”

Hy glimlag vir haar. “Mooi.”

Sy gaan staan op die trap. Dalk is hy nie die Casanova wat sy aanvanklik gedink het nie, maar dit beteken nie dat hierdie verhouding op enigiets sal uitloop nie. Hy gaan haar dalk nog ’n paar maal uitneem en dan besef dat sy die verveligste meisie is wat hy ooit ontmoet het en wonder hoekom hy in die eerste plek al die moeite gedoen het.

Hy is reg: Sy is bang. Sy het haar hart reeds halfpad op hom verloor. Sy moet iets sê, maar kan nie aan enigiets dink wat nie haar gevoelens sal verraai nie. “Moenie so bekommerd wees nie, Hildemara Waltert. Ons neem dit dag vir dag en kyk waarheen dit ons lei.”

Dit is dan ook wat hulle die volgende ses maande doen, totdat Mamma bel en sê dat Hildemara dadelik huis toe moet kom. “Jou pa het kanker.”

## Chapter 33

**1940**

Cancer meant Papa was dying. Hildie had seen patients wasting away, in pain, dying slowly, relatives coming and going, broken and grieving. Cancer meant there was no hope. Cancer meant a lingering, excruciating death. When had he been diagnosed? What had been done for him? What, if anything, could be done? How long had Mama waited before calling for help? Hildemara couldn't imagine her asking unless there was no hope at all.

She felt sick and afraid, wondering if she would be up to taking care of her father. How would she bear it? It was hard enough watching a stranger suffer.

And Trip. It meant leaving him, and she loved him so much she ached with it. She hadn't told him yet. Maybe God had kept her silent for a reason. She had no idea how long she might be gone, and then, when it was all over, what would happen to Mama? A week ago, she and Trip had had a conversation that gave her reason to hope he loved her as much as she loved him. "We can talk about the future when I graduate from UC."

"How long will that be?"

"Another year, maybe less, if I can squeeze in a few courses over the summer."

Hildie wanted to tell him two people working together toward a common goal could get there a lot faster than one man on his own. She lost her courage.

Now it didn't matter. Her father took precedence.

With newspaper headlines and radio reports blaring about the Nazis invading Denmark, Norway, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands and nurses talking about possible military service, Hildie put in for emergency leave. She packed everything in two suitcases and called Trip to break their Friday night date.

"I had something special planned."

"I'm sorry, Trip." She clutched the telephone, trying not to start crying again.

"What's wrong, Hildie?"

"My father has cancer. I'm going home to take care of him."

"Home to Murietta? I'm coming over."

"No, Trip. Please don't. I can't allow myself to think about anything but Papa right now. And I—"

"I love you, Hildie."

She wanted to say she loved him, too, but that didn't mean she didn't have to leave. She felt torn between her love for Papa and her love for Trip.

"Stay put. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

Panic set in when he hung up. She called the bus station for schedules, called Mama with the time she would arrive in Murietta, raked her fingers through her hair, and wondered if she should call a cab and go before Trip arrived. With no one in the house, she felt vulnerable. She knew she would make a complete fool of herself over him.

When the knock came, she almost didn't answer the door.

Trip knocked again, harder. "Hildie!"

She unlocked the door and opened it. Trip stepped inside and pulled her into his arms. Crying, she clung to him, knowing it would be a long time before she saw him again, if ever. He nudged the door shut with his foot. She shook with sobs and his arms tightened. She could feel his heart beating fast and hard.

Pulling her arms down, she pushed back. Trip didn't try to hold on. "I only have a few minutes before I have to leave for the bus station."

"Let me drive you to Murietta. I'd like to meet your parents."

"No."

He looked pained. "Why do I get the feeling you're closing the door on me again?" When she didn't say anything, he stepped closer. "What's going on, Hildie?"

"I don't know what I'm going to find when I get there, Trip. I don't know how long I'm going to be away. Months? A year? I have no way of knowing." If she was gone too long, he might find someone else. She wouldn't want to come back. And what would Mama say if she showed up with a young man? She hadn't mentioned Trip in any letters, holding tight to her feelings, not sharing them with anyone, except Boots, who couldn't help but see. What would Trip think if Mama spoke her mind as she always did? *"Well, this is the first I've heard you have a young man in your life."* What then?

Covering her face, Hildie burst into more tears. Embarrassed to have Trip see her so out of control, she turned away. She didn't dare tell him how she felt. It would only make everything worse. When Trip touched her shoulder, she moved away. Wiping her face, she gulped. "It's better if I go home alone. I'll have time to think, time to

get control of my emotions. I need to make some kind of plan for how to care for him."

Trip came up behind her and ran his hands down her arms. He spoke gently, reasonably. "What are your mother and father going to think of me if you arrive on a bus?"

She bit her lip. "They won't think anything."

"I know what I'd think. My daughter is keeping company with an insensitive man who doesn't care anything about her family. Not much of a recommendation there." He turned her around. "Hildie?"

"They don't know about you."

He went still, his eyes flickering with confusion, then hurt. "You never told them about us?" When she didn't answer, he let out his breath as though punched. He took his hands from her waist. "Well, I guess that makes it clear where I stand."

"You don't understand."

He stepped back and held up his hands in surrender. "It's okay. You don't need to explain. I get it."

"Trip. Please."

"Please what? You can't love someone if you can't trust him, Hildie, and you've never let yourself trust me." Eyes moist, he turned away. "I guess I should've seen this coming. I'm just dense." He picked up her two suitcases. "Is this it?" He didn't meet her eyes. "Anything else you want to take home with you?"

Was he giving her one last chance?

"You're right, Hildie. I don't understand." He went out the door. She had no choice but to follow, lock the door behind her, and get in his car.

Neither spoke on the drive to the bus station. He pulled up in front. When he started to open his door, she put her hand on his arm. "Don't get out of the car. Please. I can make it on my own." She tried to smile. She tried to tell him the last six months had been the happiest of her life. She tried to tell him she loved him and would never forget him as long as she lived. Instead, she gulped and said, "Don't hate me, Trip."

"I don't hate you."

So much for happily ever after. "Good-bye, Trip." Trembling all over, she reached for the door handle.

Swearing softly, Trip reached for her. "Just one thing before you go." He dug his fingers into her hair. "I've wanted to do this for weeks." He kissed her. He wasn't tentative or careful or even gentle.

He drank her in and filled her up with sensations. When he drew back, they both sat breathing hard, stunned. He ran his thumb over her lips, tears filling his eyes. "Something to remember me by." He let go, leaned across, and shoved the door open. "I'm sorry about your father, Hildie."

Standing on the sidewalk with her two suitcases, Hildie watched Trip drive away. He didn't look back. Not once.

She boarded the bus, found a seat in the last row by herself, and cried all the way to Murietta.

* * *

Mama stood waiting outside the bus station. She frowned when Hildie came down the steps, collected her luggage, and met her. They didn't embrace. Mama shook her head. "You look awful. Are you going to be all right? I don't want you going to pieces the minute you walk in the door and see your father. That will just make it worse for him. You understand me?"

*Cover up. Pretend everything is all right.* "I got it out of my system on the way home."

"I hope so."

Hildie had no intention of telling her mother she had just lost the love of her life. "How long have you known about the cancer?" She put her suitcases in the backseat and sat in front.

"It came on suddenly." Mama started the car.

"No symptoms at all?"

"I'm not a nurse, Hildemara. He looked a little yellow to me, and I told him so, but your father said he didn't have time for a doctor. Not then, anyway." She ground the gears.

*Yellow? Oh, God.* "Is it in his liver?"

"Yes."

Hildemara shut her eyes for a moment and then looked out the window, hoping Mama wouldn't guess what she already knew. It wouldn't be long.

Mama drove more slowly than usual. "I'm glad you're home, Hildemara."

"So am I, Mama. So am I."

* * *

Papa sat in the living room, his Bible open on his lap. Hildie set her suitcases down and went to him, trying not to show the shock at his changed physical appearance. "Hello, Papa."

He rose with difficulty. "Hildemara! Mama said she had a

surprise for me."

When he opened his arms, Hildie walked into them. She held him firmly, but gently, willing herself not to cry. "I'm home, Papa." She ran her hands over his back, guessing at how much weight he had lost since Christmas. She could feel his vertebrae, his ribs.

Papa took her by the arms and stepped back. "There was a time when you couldn't put your arms all the way around me." He had always stood straight and tall with broad shoulders and thick biceps. Now he was bent from weariness and pain. He edged back toward his chair, reaching back with a tremulous hand. She wanted to step forward and help him, but the look on his face prevented her. He had his pride, and she had already damaged it with her quick tactile examination.

"He doesn't have much appetite." Mama stood in the middle of the room. "But I'll get supper on the stove. I'm sure you're hungry after your long trip, Hildemara."

Hildie bent and picked up her suitcases so Papa wouldn't see her tears. "I hope I'm not sleeping on the sofa."

"Bernie's room is empty, now that he and Elizabeth are settled in the new cottage. You can sleep in there. Bernie's out in the orchard. Elizabeth loves farming as much as your brother. She grows flats of flowers for the nursery."

"Wish she'd grow us some grandchildren," Papa said with a laugh.

Hildie felt a wave of sadness. She had learned more than she wanted to know about some things while in the hospital. For Bernie to father a child, after the case of mumps he'd had as a boy, would take a miracle. She remembered him screaming in pain as the disease attacked his testicles. She hadn't understood then what she knew now. She wondered if Dr. Whiting would ever tell them. Probably not, unless they asked. "Will they be eating with us?"

"No. She cooks for the two of them."

Hildie set her suitcases in Bernie's old room and looked out through the screen. The cottage her brother had built for his bride was white with yellow shutters. A flower box held purple pansies and white alyssum. A lattice shed had been built beyond the washhouse past the bay tree. Elizabeth stood inside it, working among flats of flowers.

"Rikka will be home from school soon," Mama called out over the radio Papa always wanted turned on in the living room. Another

radio music program had been interrupted with the increasingly dismal news in Europe. Germans were bombing Paris. Norway surrendered. In Italy, Mussolini declared war on Britain and France. As sick as he was, Papa still wanted to know what went on in the world.

Rikki had commencement exercises soon, Hildie remembered. Papa had already insisted he would attend the ceremony, even if he had to use a cane.

Hildie came back into the living room. “You want any help, Mama?”

“No. You just sit with Papa and visit.”

Hildie sat at the end of the sofa closest to Papa’s chair. He reminded her of the old gentlemen on the geriatric ward. Cancer aged a man. Her heart broke watching him lean back carefully, a hand resting lightly over his swollen abdomen. “Your baby sister is doing well in high school. Top grades in art.”

“No surprise there, Papa.”

Mama cut peeled potatoes into pieces over a pot. “She wanted to quit and get married a while back.”

“Married! To Paul?” Or was it Johnny? She couldn’t remember. Her baby sister went through boys faster than babies went through diapers.

Mama snorted. “She’s had two boyfriends since Paul. The new one is Melvin Walker. He’s an improvement over the others—five years older, has a good, steady job.”

Papa smiled. “She’ll know when the right one comes along, and I have a feeling it isn’t this one.”

Hildie thought of Trip. He’d been the right one. It just hadn’t been the right time.

Mama added water to the pot. “This one won’t be brushed off. He knows what he wants, and he’s sticking close until she sees his worth.”

Papa chuckled. “Sounds like what I had to do.” His eyes twinkled as he looked at Hildie. “There’s nothing wrong with a little romance. How about you, Hildemara? Have you met anyone special?”

“Would she be here if she had?” Mama set the pot on the stove.

“I’ve had a few dates.” Hildie wondered what they would say if she told them she had met and fallen in love with a man, that she had dreamed of marrying him and having his children. Better to have them think she had no luck with love than know she had given him up to take care of Papa. Papa would send her back, and she needed to be

here. Now that she saw Papa, she knew how much.

Papa held out his hand. When she took it, she felt the bones through his rough skin. "I was surprised when Mama said you wanted to come home." She realized with some surprise that Papa didn't know Mama had called and asked her to come. Hildie felt guilty for not knowing how sick he was before this. If she had come home sometime during the last few months, she might have seen signs and given warning. Instead, she had been so caught up in her own life, in Trip, in love that she hadn't bothered.

"Well, it's about time, isn't it, Niclas?" Mama grabbed a towel. "I could use a little help around here." She tossed the towel on the counter and put her hands on her hips.

Hildie took the cue. "I've missed you both. I've wanted to come home for quite a while. I hope you won't mind having me around for a month or two."

"I know what's going on." Papa's voice had an edge of anger in it. "How could you do this, Marta? Hildemara's got a life of her own."

"Working. That's her life. She's a nurse, and a good one. She led the class procession as the Lady with the Lamp. She had to be the top student to do that. She knows what's what, and we need a nurse. Why not one who loves you?"

"Oh, Marta." Papa sounded so weary and defeated. He couldn't fight back anymore.

Mama's arms dropped to her sides. "It's what she's always wanted to do, Niclas. You said it was what God called her to do. Maybe it was for such a time as this. Tell him, Hildemara."

Hildie heard the pleading in Mama's voice and saw the telltale brightness in her hazel eyes. Papa looked crushed in spirit. "I didn't want to become a burden, Marta."

"You're not a burden, Papa, and I'd have been hurt if Mama hadn't called and someone else tended you. Life is short enough as it is for all of us. Time is the most precious thing we have, isn't it?" She took his hand between hers. "There's no place I'd rather be than right here." On the bus ride to Murietta, she had buried and mourned all the might-have-beens.

He looked into her eyes and went very still, comprehending. "We don't have much time, do we?"

"No, Papa. We don't."

Turning away, Mama gripped the sink. Her shoulders sagged and shook, but she didn't make a noise.

* * *

Hildemara lay awake inside the screened porch bedroom, listening to the crickets and a hoot owl in the bay tree near the tree house. She prayed for her father. She prayed for Trip. She prayed God would give her the strength she would need, knowing each day would become more difficult.

When she finally slept, she dreamed of long, polished corridors. Someone stood in the open doorway at the end, surrounded by light. She ran toward him and felt his arms go around her. She heard his whisper against her hair, inside her heart, not in words but in rest.

She awakened when a rooster crowed. The back door opened and closed, then the screen door. Sitting up, Hildie watched Mama cross the yard to feed the chickens.

Hildie went into the bathroom built by the Summer Bedlam boys and showered, brushed her teeth and hair, dressed, and went into the kitchen. She poured coffee and sat at the kitchen table reading her Bible. Covering her face, she prayed for Mama and Papa and the days ahead. Then she thought about Papa standing beneath the white almond blossom canopy in spring, singing a German hymn. She thought of him sharpening tools in the barn, digging irrigation ditches, sitting in his wagon loaded with vegetables from Mama's garden.

*Today, Lord,* she prayed. *Give me strength for the day. This is a day You have made and I will rejoice in it. I will. God, give me strength.*

When Hildie heard Papa groan, she went to him, prepared to play the role God had given her.

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*I do not know if you will receive this letter with all that is happening in Europe, but I must write. Niclas has cancer. He is dying. I can do nothing for him but sit and try to make him more comfortable.*

*I had no choice but to ask Hildemara to give up her life and come home. He needs a nurse. He worsens by the day and I can't bear to see him in such pain. She is a great comfort to us both.*

*Niclas still insists on listening to the radio, and all the news is depressing and frightening. As you know better than I, Hitler has gone mad with power. He will not stop until he has the whole of Europe in his hands. My old friend, Chef Warner Brennholtz, returned to Berlin several years ago. No word from him for two Christmases. And now*

*London is being bombed. I fear for Lady Daisy. I pray the mountains will protect you and yours.*

*All these terrible things that are happening only deepen my worries over Niclas. I must be strong for him! Bernhard and I must continue the work around the ranch or Niclas worries everything will fall apart. I tell him that will not happen, not while I have strength in my body. But he has always been able to read my thoughts. He understands me too well. He sees too much.*

*A world at war mirrors the state of my heart, Rosie. I am at war with God. My soul cries out to Him, but He does not hear. Where is God's mercy? Where is His justice? Niclas does not deserve such suffering. . . .*

# Hoofstuk 33

## 1940

Kanker beteken dat Pappa besig is om dood te gaan. Hildie het pasiënte sien wegteer, 'n pynlike, stadige dood sien sterf, hoe familielede gebroke en hartseer kom en gaan. Kanker beteken dat daar nie meer hoop is nie. Kanker beteken 'n uitgerekte, folterende dood. Wanneer is hy gediagnoseer? Wat is daar vir hom gedoen? Wat, indien enigiets, kan vir hom gedoen word? Hoe lank het Mamma gewag voordat sy haar gevra het om te help? Hildemara kan haar nie indink dat sy sou vra alvorens daar geen hoop was nie.

Sy voel siek en bang, onseker of sy daartoe in staat is om haar pa te versorg. Dis erg genoeg om 'n vreemdeling te sien ly.

En Trip. Dit beteken dat sy van hom moet weggaan, en sy is so lief vir hom dat dit seermaak. Sy het nog nie vir hom gesê nie. Dalk het die Here haar om 'n rede niks laat sê nie. Sy het nie 'n idee hoe lank sy sal weg wees nie, of wat van Mamma gaan word wanneer alles verby is nie. 'n Week gelede het sy en Trip 'n gesprek gehad wat haar rede gegee het om te hoop dat hy haar liefde beantwoord. "Ons kan oor die toekoms praat wanneer ek by Berkeley klaarmaak."

"Hoe lank gaan dit wees?"

"Nog 'n jaar, dalk minder as ek 'n paar kursusse oor die somer ingepas kan kry."

Hildie wou vir hom sê dat twee mense wat na 'n gemeenskaplike doel werk, baie vinniger daar kan kom as een mens op sy eie. Haar moed het haar begewe.

Nou maak dit nie saak nie. Haar pa is haar eerste prioriteit.

Met die koerantopskrifte en radioberigte se nuus oor die Nazi's se inname van Denemarke, Noorweë, Frankryk, België, Luxemburg en Nederland, en die verpleegsters se gesprekke oor moontlike militêre diens, doen Hildie aansoek om onmiddellike verlof. Sy pak alles in twee tasse en bel Trip om hulle afspraak vir Vrydagaand te kanselleer.

"Ek het iets spesiaals beplan."

“Ek’s jammer, Trip.” Haar vingers span om die telefoon en sy probeer om nie weer te begin huil nie.

“Wat is fout, Hildie?”

“My pa het kanker. Ek gaan huis toe om hom te verpleeg.”

“Terug Murietta toe? Ek kom na jou toe.”

“Nee, Trip. Moet asseblief nie. Ek kan myself nie toelaat om aan enigiets anders as Pappa te dink nie. En ek – ”

“Ek is lief vir jou, Hildie.”

Sy wil sê dat sy hom ook liefhet, maar dit beteken nie dat sy kan bly nie. Sy voel verskeurd tussen haar liefde vir Pappa en haar liefde vir Trip.

“Bly net daar. Ek is oor ’n halfuur by jou.”

Sy wil paniekerig raak toe sy aflui. Sy bel die busstasie vir ’n kaartjie, bel Mamma om te sê hoe laat sy in Murietta sal aankom, trek haar vingers deur haar hare en wonder of sy ’n huurmotor moet bel en ry voordat Trip daar opdaag. So alleen in die huis voel sy weerloos. Sy weet sy gaan ’n totale gek van haarself voor hom maak.

Toe hy klop, gaan maak sy amper nie oop nie.

Trip klop weer, harder. “Hildie!”

Sy gaan sluit oop en toe Trip inkom, trek hy haar teen hom vas. Sy klou huilend aan hom vas, want dit gaan lank wees voordat sy hom weer gaan sien, indien ooit. Hy stoot die deur met sy voet toe. Sy ruk van die snik en sy arms span stywer. Sy kan sy hart vinnig en hard voel klop.

Sy laat sak haar arms en staan terug. Trip probeer haar nie teëhou nie. “Ek het net ’n paar minute voordat ek moet stasie toe gaan.”

“Ek sal jou Murietta toe neem. Ek wil jou ouers ontmoet.”

“Nee.”

Hy lyk verslae. “Hoekom kry ek die gevoel dat jy my weer wil uitsluit?” Toe sy niks sê nie, kom hy nader. “Wat is aan die gang, Hildie?”

“Ek weet nie wat ek gaan aantref wanneer ek daar aankom nie, Trip. Ek weet nie hoe lank ek gaan weg wees nie. Maande? ’n Jaar? Ek weet nie.” As sy te lank wegbly, gaan hy dalk iemand anders kry. Sy sal nie wil terugkom nie. En wat gaan Mamma sê as sy met ’n jong man by die huis aankom? Sy het nie van Trip in haar briewe geskryf nie, maar styf aan haar gevoelens vasgehou en hulle met niemand buiten Boots gedeel wat in elk geval kon sien nie. Wat gaan Trip dink as Mamma soos altyd haar opinie lug? “*O, dis die eerste keer wat ek hoor dat jy ’n jong man in jou lewe het.*” Wat dan?

Hildie druk haar gesig in haar hande en bars van voor af uit in trane. Sy draai weg, verleë dat Trip haar so buite beheer sien. Sy durf hom nie vertel hoe sy voel nie. Dit sal alles net erger maak. Toe Trip aan haar skouer raak, tree sy weg. Sy vee haar gesig af en sluk.

"Dis beter dat ek alleen huis toe gaan. Ek sal tyd hê om te dink, tyd om my emosies onder beheer te kry. Ek moet aan 'n manier dink hoe ek hom gaan versorg."

Trip kom staan agter haar en vryf oor haar arms. Hy praat sag, verstandig. "Wat gaan jou ma en pa van my dink as jy op 'n bus daar aankom?"

Sy byt op haar lip. "Hulle gaan niks dink nie."

"Ek weet wat hulle gaan dink. Ons dogter gaan uit met 'n onsensitiewe man wat nie vir haar familie omgee nie. Watter indruk skep dit van my?" Hy draai haar om. "Hildie?"

"Ek het hulle nie van jou vertel nie."

Hy verstil en sy sien die verwarring en dan die seer in sy oë. "Jy het hulle nog nooit van ons vertel nie?" Toe sy nie antwoord nie, laat hy sy asem uit asof hy geslaan is. Hy laat haar gaan. "Nou ja, dan weet ek waar ek staan."

"Jy verstaan nie."

Hy tree terug en hou sy hande op asof in oorgawe. "Dis reg so. Jy hoef nie te verduidelik nie. Ek verstaan."

"Trip. Asseblief."

"Asseblief wat? Jy kan nie vir iemand lief wees as jy hom nie vertrou nie, Hildie, en jy het jouself nog nooit toegelaat om my te vertrou nie." Sy oë blink toe hy wegdraai. "Ek moes dit seker sien kom het. Ek was onnosel." Hy tel haar twee tasse op. "Is dit al?" Hy kyk haar nie in die oë nie. "Is daar nog iets wat jy saam met jou wil huis toe neem?"

Gee hy haar een laaste kans?

"Jy's reg, Hildie. Ek verstaan nie." Hy gaan by die deur uit. Sy het nie 'n ander keuse as om hom te volg nie, sy sluit die deur en klim saam met hom in die kar.

Hulle ry in stilte totdat hy voor die stasie parkeer. Toe hy sy deur begin oopmaak, sit sy haar hand op sy arm. "Moenie uitklim nie. Asseblief. Ek kan self daar kom." Sy probeer glimlag. Sy wil vir hom sê dat die afgelope ses maande die gelukkigste tyd in haar lewe was. Sy wil vir hom sê dat sy hom liefhet en hom vir so lank as wat sy lewe nooit sal vergeet nie. In plaas daarvan sluk sy en sê: "Moet my nie haat nie, Trip."

“Ek haat jou nie.”

Dis die einde van haar sprokie. “Totsiens, Trip.” Sy bewe toe sy na die handvatsel reik.

Trip vloek sag en leun nader. “Net een ding voordat jy gaan.” Hy stoot sy vingers deur haar hare. “Ek wou dit al vir weke doen.” Hy soen haar. Hy is nie aarselend of versigtig of selfs sag nie. Hy drink haar in totdat sy bedwelmd is. Toe hy haar laat gaan, sit hulle albei uitasem, geskok. Hy streel met sy duim oor haar lippe en sy oë is vol trane. “Ek’s jammer oor jou pa, Hildie.”

Toe sy ’n paar oomblikke later met haar twee tasse op die sypaadjie staan, kyk sy hoe Trip wegry. Hy kyk nie om nie. Nie een maal nie.

Sy klim op die bus, kry ’n plek in die laaste ry en huil die hele pad Murietta toe.

* * *

Mamma staan voor die bushalte en wag. Sy frons toe Hildie met die trappies afkom, haar bagasie kry en by haar aansluit. Hulle omhels nie. Mamma skud haar kop. “Jy lyk vreeslik. Sien jy kans hiervoor? Ek wil nie hê jy moet ten gronde gaan wanneer jy inloop en jou pa sien nie. Dit gaan dit vir hom net erger maak. Verstaan jy?”

*Wees sterk. Maak asof niks verkeerd is nie*. “Ek het dit op pad huis toe uit my gestel gekry.”

“Ek hoop so.”

Hildie is glad nie van plan om vir haar ma te vertel dat sy so pas die liefde van haar lewe verloor het nie. “Hoe lank weet julle al van die kanker?” Nadat sy haar tasse op die agtersitplek neergesit het, kom sit sy voor.

“Dit was baie skielik.” Mamma skakel die motor aan.

“Was daar nie simptome nie?”

“Ek is nie ’n verpleegster nie, Hildemara. Hy het vir my ’n bietjie geel gelyk, en ek het dit vir hom gesê, maar hy het gesê dat hy nie tyd het vir ’n dokter nie. Nie toe al nie, in elk geval.” Sy krap die ratte.

*Geel? O, Here*.

“Is dit in sy lewer?”

“Ja.”

Hildemara sluit haar oë vir ’n oomblik en kyk deur die venster. Sy hoop nie Mamma raai wat sy reeds weet nie. Dit gaan nie lank wees nie.

Mamma ry stadiger. “Ek is bly jy is by die huis, Hildemara.”
“Ek ook, Mamma. Ek ook.”

***

Pappa sit in die woonkamer, sy Bybel oop op sy skoot. Nadat Hildie haar tasse neergesit het, gaan sy na hom toe en probeer nie wys hoe geskok sy oor die verandering in sy fisiese voorkoms is nie. “Hallo, Pappa.”

Hy staan moeilik op. “Hildemara! Mamma het gesê dat sy vir my ’n verrassing het.”

Toe hy sy arms oopmaak en haar vasdruk, hou sy hom ferm maar sagkens vas en dwing haarself om nie te huil nie. “Ek is by die huis, Pappa.” Sy vryf oor sy rug en wonder hoeveel gewig hy sedert Kersfees verloor het. Sy kan sy ruggraat en sy ribbes voel.

Pappa neem haar aan die arms en staan terug. “Daar was ’n tyd dat jy nie jou arms om my lyf kon kry nie.” Hy was altyd so regop en fier met breë skouers en bonkige arms. Nou is hy kromgetrek van uitputting en pyn. Hy skuifel terug na sy stoel en steek ’n bewerige hand agter hom na die armleuning uit. Sy wil nader staan en hom help, maar die kyk op sy gesig keer haar. Hy het sy trots en sy het dit alreeds aangetas met haar vinnige ondersoek.

“Hy het nie juis ’n eetlus nie.” Mamma staan in die middel van die vertrek. “Maar ek gaan iets op die stoof sit. Jy is seker honger na die lang rit, Hildemara.”

Hildie buk om haar tasse op te tel sodat Pappa nie haar trane sal sien nie. “Ek hoop nie ek slaap op die bank nie.”

“Bernie se kamer is leeg noudat hy en Elizabeth in die nuwe kothuis bly. Jy kan daar slaap. Bernie werk in die boord. Elizabeth is net so lief vir boer soos jou broer. Sy kweek plate blomme vir die kwekery.”

“Ek wens hulle wil vir ons begin kleinkinders kweek,” sê Pappa met ’n laggie.

’n Vlaag hartseer kom oor Hildie. In die hospitaal het sy meer van sommige dinge geleer as wat sy wou weet. Met die pampoentjies wat Bernie as kind gehad het, gaan dit ’n wonderwerk wees as hulle ooit kinders het. Sy onthou hoe hy geskree het van die pyn toe die siekte na sy testikels versprei het. Sy het destyds nie verstaan wat sy nou weet nie. Sy wonder of dokter Whiting dit ooit vir hulle sal sê. Waarskynlik nie, tensy hulle vra. “Gaan hulle saam met ons eet?”

"Nee. Sy kook vir hulle."

Hildie gaan sit haar tasse in Bernie se ou kamer neer en kyk deur die gaas. Die kothuis wat haar broer vir sy bruid gebou het, is wit met geel luike. Daar is 'n blombak met pers gesiggies en wit heuningblommetjies. 'n Soort skuur van latwerk is agter die waskamer aan die anderkant van die lourierboom gebou. Elizabeth is tussen die blomme daar aan die werk.

"Rikka gaan nou-nou van die skool af kom," roep Mamma bo-oor die radio wat Pappa altyd in die woonkamer aangeskakel wil hê. Nog 'n musiekprogram is deur die toenemend somber nuus uit Europa onderbreek. Die Duitsers is besig om Parys te bombardeer. Noorweë het oorgegee. In Italië het Mussolini teen Brittanje en Frankryk oorlog verklaar. So siek as wat hy is, wil Pappa steeds weet wat in die wêreld aangaan.

Rikka het binnekort haar diplomaplegtigheid, onthou Hildie. Pappa het reeds daarop aangedring dat hy die seremonie bywoon, selfs al moet hy met 'n kierie gaan.

Hildie gaan terug na die woonkamer toe. "Kan ek Mamma met iets help?"

"Nee. Gaan sit jy net by Pappa en kuier."

Hildie gaan sit op die punt van die rusbank naaste aan Pappa se stoel. Hy herinner haar aan die ou mans in die geriatriese saal. Kanker maak 'n mens oud. Dit breek haar hart om te sien hoe hy versigtig terugsit, hoe sy hand lig op sy geswolle maag rus. "Jou kleinsus vaar goed op hoërskool. Haar kunspunte is uitstekend."

"Dit verbaas my nie, Pappa."

Mamma sny geskilde aartappels bokant 'n pot. "'n Rukkie terug wou sy uit die skool gaan en trou."

"Trou! Met Paul?" Of was dit Johnny? Sy kan nie onthou nie. Haar kleinsus gaan vinniger deur seuns as 'n baba deur doeke.

Mamma snork. "Ná Paul het sy al twee kêrels gehad. Die nuwe een is Melvin Walker. Hy's 'n verbetering op die ander – vyf jaar ouer en met 'n goeie, standvastige werk."

Pappa glimlag. "Sy sal weet wanneer die regte man verbykom en ek het 'n gevoel dis nie hierdie een nie."

Hildie dink aan Trip. Hy was die regte een. Dit was net nie die regte tyd nie.

Mamma gooi water in die pot. "Hierdie een sal hom nie laat afsit nie. Hy weet wat hy wil hê, en hy sal rondhang totdat sy sien wat sy in hom het."

Pappa lag sag. "Soos wat ek moes doen." Sy oë glinster toe hy na Hildie kyk. "Daar's niks fout met 'n bietjie romanse nie. Wat van jou, Hildemara? Het jy al iemand spesiaal ontmoet?"

"Sou sy hier gewees het as sy het?" Mamma sit die pot op die stoof neer.

"Ek was op 'n paar afsprake." Hildie wonder wat hulle gaan sê as sy hulle vertel dat sy 'n man ontmoet en liefgekry het, dat sy daarvan droom om met hom te trou en sy kinders te hê. Hulle moet eerder dink dat sy niemand het nie as om te weet dat sy hom moes laat gaan sodat sy Pappa kan versorg. Pappa sal haar terugstuur en sy moet hier wees; hy het haar nodig. Noudat sy Pappa gesien het, weet sy hoe dringend.

Pappa steek sy hand uit. Toe sy dit neem, voel sy die bene deur sy growwe vel. "Ek was verras toe Mamma sê jy wou huis toe kom." Sy besef verbaas dat Pappa nie weet dat Mamma haar gebel en gevra het om huis toe te kom nie. Hildie voel skuldig omdat sy nie vroeër besef het hoe siek hy is nie. As sy iewers gedurende die laaste paar maande gekom het, sou sy dit dalk opgemerk het en hulle kon waarsku. In plaas daarvan was sy so vasgevang in haar eie lewe, in Trip en in die liefde dat sy nie die moeite gedoen het nie.

"Dit was hoog tyd, nè, Niclas?" Mamma gryp 'n vadoek. "Ek kan doen met 'n bietjie hulp." Sy gooi die vadoek op die toonbank en plant haar hande op haar heupe.

Hildie snap. "Ek het na julle albei verlang. Ek wou al vir 'n geruime tyd huis toe kom. Ek het gehoop dat julle nie sou omgee om my vir 'n maand of twee hier te hê nie."

"Ek weet wat hier aan die gang is." Hildemara kan die tikkie kwaad in haar pa se stem hoor. "Hoe kon jy dit doen, Marta? Hildemara het 'n lewe van haar eie."

"Sy werk. Dis haar lewe. Sy is 'n verpleegster, en 'n goeie een daarby. Sy het die prosessie as die Dame van die Lamp gelei. Dit beteken dat sy die beste student was. Sy weet wat sy doen en ons het 'n verpleegster nodig. Hoekom nie iemand wat vir jou lief is nie?"

"Ag, Marta." Pappa klink moeg en verslane. Hy kan nie meer terugveg nie.

Mamma se arms val na haar sye. "Dis wat sy nog altyd wou doen, Niclas. Jy het gesê dis waarvoor die Here haar geroep het. Dalk was dit met die oog op so 'n tyd. Sê vir hom, Hildemara."

Hildie hoor die smeking in haar ma se stem en sien die verraderlike blinkheid in haar ligbruin oë. Pappa lyk gebroke. "Ek wou nie 'n las

word nie, Marta.”

“Pappa is nie ’n las nie, en ek sou seergemaak gewees het as Mamma iemand anders gekry het om Pappa te versorg. Soos dit is, is die lewe reeds kort genoeg. Tyd is immers ons kosbaarste besitting.” Sy neem sy hand tussen hare. “Daar is nêrens anders waar ek eerder wil wees nie.” Op die busrit na Murietta het sy reeds gedink aan alles wat kon gewees het, daaroor getreur en dit agter haar gesit.

Hy kyk in haar oë en begrip verskyn op sy gesig. “Ons het nie veel tyd nie, nie waar nie?”

“Nee, Pappa. Ons het nie.”

Mamma draai weg en hou aan die wasbak vas. Haar skouers begin ruk, maar sy maak nie ’n geluid nie.

***

Hildemara lê in die stoepkamer en luister na die krieke en ’n uil in die lourierboom naby die huis. Sy bid vir haar pa. Sy bid vir Trip. Sy bid vir krag, want sy weet dit gaan elke dag moeiliker raak.

Toe sy uiteindelik aan die slaap raak, droom sy van ’n lang, gepoleerde gang. Iemand staan in die oop deur op die punt. Sy hardloop na hom toe en voel sy arms rondom haar gaan. Sy hoor sy fluistering teen haar hare, in haar hart, nie in woorde nie, maar in rus.

Sy word wakker toe die haan kraai. Die agterdeur gaan oop en toe, en dan die gaasdeur. Hildie sit regop en kyk hoe Mamma oor die werf loop om die hoenders te gaan kos gee.

Hildie gaan na die badkamer wat deur die somerkamp-seuns gebou is, stort en borsel haar tande en hare. Nadat sy aangetrek het, gaan sy kombuis toe. Sy skink koffie en sit by die kombuistafel en lees haar Bybel. Sy hou haar hande oor haar gesig en bid vir Mamma en Pappa en die dae wat vir hulle voorlê. Sy dink aan Pappa waar hy in die lente onder die wit amandelbloeisels staan en Duitse gesange sing. Sy dink aan hom waar hy sy gereedskap in die skuur slyp, leivore grawe, sien hom op sy wa vol groente uit Mamma se tuin.

*Vandag, Here,* bid sy. *Gee my krag vir vandag. Dit is ’n dag wat U gemaak het en ek sal daarin bly wees. Ek sal. Here, gee my krag.*

Toe Hildie haar pa hoor kreun, gaan sy na hom toe, bereid om die taak te verrig wat die Here haar gegee het.

***

*Liewe Rosie*

*Met alles wat in Europa gebeur, weet ek nie of hierdie brief jou gaan bereik nie, maar ek moet skryf. Niclas het kanker. Hy is besig om dood te gaan. Ek kan niks vir hom doen buiten om te sit en te probeer om hom gemaklik te hou nie.*

*Ek kon nie anders as om Hildemara te vra om haar lewe op te gee en hiernatoe te kom nie. Hy het 'n verpleegster nodig. Hy verswak daagliks en ek kan dit nie verdra om hom in soveel pyn te sien nie. Sy is vir ons albei 'n wonderlike vertroosting.*

*Niclas dring steeds daarop aan om radio te luister, en al die nuus is ontstellend en angswekkend. Soos jy beter as ek weet, het Hitler se mag hom waansinnig gemaak. Hy gaan nie ophou voordat hy die hele Europa in sy hande het nie. My ou vriend, chef Warner Brennholtz, is 'n paar jaar gelede terug Berlyn toe. Ek het die twee laaste Kersfeeste niks van hom gehoor nie. En nou word Londen gebombardeer. Ek's bekommerd oor lady Daisy. Ek bid dat die berge jou en jou geliefdes sal beskerm.*

*Al hierdie verskriklike dinge wat gebeur, verdiep net my kommer oor Niclas. Ek moet sterk wees vir hom! Ek en Bernhard moet die plaas aan die gang hou, anders bekommer Niclas hom dat alles ten gronde sal gaan. Ek sê vir hom dat dit nie sal gebeur nie, nie terwyl ek krag in my lyf het nie. Maar hy kon nog altyd my gedagtes lees.*

*'n Oorloggeteisterde wêreld weerspieël dit wat in my hart aangaan, Rosie. Ek is in 'n oorlog gewikkel met God. My siel roep uit na Hom, maar Hy hoor my nie. Waar is God se genade? Waar is sy geregtigheid? Niclas verdien dit nie om so te ly nie ...*

## Chapter 34

Each evening after Papa had gone to bed, Hildie sat at the kitchen table with Mama. She read her Bible while Mama wrote letters. She had been writing to Rosie Brechtwald for as long as Hildie could remember. All Hildie knew was Mama and Rosie had been schoolmates. Mama had written to others over the years, and she received responses, usually around Christmastime, from Felda Braun, Warner Brennholtz, and Solange and Herve Fournier, all in Switzerland. Mama used to cut off the stamps and give them to Bernie. Her brother asked once why Mama wrote to people she'd never see again. "I see them here." She pointed to her head. "And here." She touched her heart.

"And God willing, we'll see them again when the last trumpet blows," Papa added.

Hildie and Mama didn't say much to one another. Before Hildie went to bed, she put her hand on Mama's shoulder and said good night. Sometimes Mama answered.

Hildie got up early one morning after she'd been home for about a week and sat waiting for Mama at the breakfast table before the sun came up. "I'm going into town and see Dr. Whiting, Mama."

"Why? He'll be out the end of the week."

"Papa needs pain medication."

Mama poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the table. "He won't take it, Hildemara. He said he doesn't want to spend his last months on earth too drugged to think clearly."

"He may change his mind."

Mama bowed her head. "You know your father."

"I need to be ready, in case."

"You can take the car."

Hildie chuckled. "I would if I knew how to drive. I'll walk."

"Why didn't you ever learn? A nurse makes good money, doesn't she? Clotilde bought a car the first week she lived in Burbank and got that apprenticeship making costumes. Even Rikka knows how to drive."

"I lived a block from the hospital, and if I wanted to go anywhere else, there was always a city bus going the same direction. One of these days, I'll learn."

"I could teach you."

"Now isn't the time." Hildie clasped her cup in both hands,

staring at her coffee as she spoke. “We’ll have to work together, Mama, and make him as comfortable as possible.”

Mama set her cup down forcefully. “I don’t want him comfortable. I want him to live.”

“I’m a nurse. Not God.”

“Did I say you were? Did I ask any more of you than what you’ve been trained to do?”

Hildie pushed her chair back, picked up her cup and saucer, and set them on the counter. “I’ll wash them later.” She headed for the back door.

“Where are you going?”

“To see Dr. Whiting.”

“It’s not even light yet.”

“It’ll be light enough by the time I get there.”

“For heaven’s sake, sit down and I’ll fix you breakfast.”

“I’ll eat at the café.”

“You can be such a fool, Hildemara!”

Shaking, Hildie stopped and looked at her from the doorway. “Be angry, Mama. Be raging mad! But aim it at the cancer!” She closed the door as she went out.

Hugging her coat around her, Hildie walked to town. She took her time, drinking in the fresh morning air, the smell of damp sand and vineyards, the sound of water churning at Grand Junction, the scent of eucalyptus. She stopped by the site of the house her brother and Fritz had burned down. Someone had bought the property and built a new house and barn.

The café lights were on. She recognized the waitress. “You’re Dorothy Pietrowski, aren’t you? You graduated with my brother, Bernie Waltert.”

“Oh yeah.” The plump, dark-haired girl grinned. “I remember him: big, good-looking, blond guy with blue eyes. All the girls were crazy in love with him. Elizabeth Kenney has all the luck.” Her smile flattened. “I don’t remember you.”

“Few people do.” Hildie smiled, extended her hand, and introduced herself.

Dorothy seemed in no hurry to take her order. “Your father’s sick, isn’t he?”

“How did you know?”

“People talk. My dad has a lot of respect for him even if he is a —” She blushed crimson. “Sorry.”

“A Hun?” Hildie laughed it off. “We’re all naturalized Americans and proud of it. We even have little celebratory flags and documents to prove it.”

“People can be so stupid.” Clearly, Dorothy didn’t include herself. She shrugged again. “What can I get you this morning, Hildemara?”

“The farmer’s special.” Eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns, toast, orange juice, and plenty of hot coffee.

Dorothy laughed as she stuck her pencil behind her ear. “It’ll be right up.”

Hildie remembered Mama and Papa talking about the war to end all wars. She remembered the year the Herkners’ bakery burned to the ground. It hadn’t just been about business. People didn’t come home from fighting a war and get over it in a day or even a year. To some, it didn’t matter how long a family had been in the country or how long since they’d passed their citizens’ test. All that mattered was where they came from. And Papa came from Germany.

Dorothy came back with several plates and set them down in front of Hildie. “It’s a wonder how you can be so thin.” She came back to replenish Hildie’s coffee. They talked each time she did. Finally, Dorothy slipped into the booth and told her how Murietta never changed. Maybe that was good; maybe it was bad. Hildie told her about nurse’s training, her job at Samuel Merritt, and the people she had met. The only one she didn’t talk about was Trip Arundel. The bell jangled.

“This is when it gets busy.” Dorothy slipped out of the booth. “It’s been good talking with you.” She picked up the coffeepot. “I hope you’ll come in again.”

“I enjoyed it, too, but I think this is the last time I’ll be out of the house for a while.”

* * *

Dr. Whiting had tears in his eyes as he sat behind his desk. “He’s a proud man, Hildemara. And a stubborn one, too. Of course, I’ll give you whatever you need. The cancer is going faster than I expected, but maybe that’s a good thing, if you understand what I mean.”

Hildemara nodded. “It won’t be long, Dr. Whiting.”

“I imagine you’ve seen enough dying in the hospital to recognize the signs.” He tented his hands and sat silent, thinking. Hildemara didn’t press. The doctor got up and went out. He came back a few minutes later and put a small box on the desk between them. “Morphine. Enough dosages to last a week under normal

circumstances. I'll order more. Your father is going to refuse it at first, Hildemara. When he does, you ask him how he'd manage to watch someone he loves die slowly and in excruciating pain. Once he has the first injection, he'll argue less the next time. He may even come to ask you. It's one of the most addictive substances we know, but that doesn't matter under these circumstances."

Blinking back tears, Hildemara rose. "Thanks, Doctor." She took the vials. "What dosage do you prescribe?"

"I'm leaving that up to you." Dr. Whiting cleared his throat. "You give Niclas as much as you think he needs. I promise when it's all over, I won't question your judgment."

It took a few seconds to realize what he meant. She thought her legs would go out from under her. "I can't do that."

"You say that now."

"I won't!"

Dr. Whiting stood and came around the desk to embrace her. He patted her back as she cried. When she managed to regain composure, he opened the door and walked her through the waiting room. "I'll come out at the end of the week."

Hildemara walked home, feeling like she had a hundred-pound weight in her purse rather than a small white box containing vials of morphine.

* * *

Mama sat with Papa in the afternoons. Hildemara knew they needed time to be alone and went to visit with Elizabeth. The cottage Papa and Bernie had built had a concrete foundation and indoor plumbing. The kitchen had a big white stove with counters built on both sides for work space. It had a refrigerator instead of an icebox, a bathroom with sink, toilet, and tub with a shower overhead. The living room wasn't big, but cozy with a love seat and chair, a coffee table, side table, two lamps, and a radio, which Elizabeth had playing. Except for having only one bedroom, it was similar in size to the house Hildie had shared with Boots.

"It's perfect for us, now." Elizabeth looked around, still glowing like a new bride. "But we'll need more room when we have children."

Hildemara looked away. "You have a green thumb. All those flowers in the flower boxes and the flats."

Elizabeth laughed. "Who would have guessed I'd be good at something as worthwhile as growing things?" She grew serious. "I can hardly wait to be growing a child." She blushed, lowering her eyes.

"We're trying. We were hoping to have good news before Papa . . ." When she looked up, her eyes were glassy with tears. "A baby would cheer him up, don't you think?"

Hildemara looked down into her coffee.

Elizabeth leaned over and put her hand on Hildie's arm. "I'm so glad you're home, Hildie. I've missed you." She squeezed and let go. "I know this is an awful thing to admit, but I was scared to death your mother might expect me to help take care of Papa. I don't know the first thing about nursing, and frankly, Mama can be a little intimidating at times."

Hildie smiled at her. "A little? At times? She still intimidates me on a daily basis!"

"Your mother is amazing, Hildie. She knows as much about running this place as your father. She gave Bernie a list of what has to be done, when and how, who to contact when the almonds and raisins are ready for market. She had it all written in her journal."

Hildemara knew Papa had no worries about the farm. He had said the other day he had full confidence that Bernie could run things for Mama, if Mama allowed. Now she couldn't help but wonder if Mama was already making preparations for Papa's passing, but she didn't dare ask.

* * *

Boots wrote.

*I saw Trip the other day. He asked about you and your father. He asked if you planned to come back to Merritt. I told him I didn't know, and you probably didn't either. You should write to him, Flo. The poor guy looks like a lost soul.*

Hildie gathered her courage and wrote to Trip. She kept the letter short and focused on Papa and Mama, Bernie and Elizabeth, what it felt like to be home after four years away, how little her hometown had changed. One page. A week later, her letter came back marked *No forwarding address*.

* * *

Papa lost his embarrassment as the weeks passed, and Hildemara took over washing him and changing sheets. She gave a pattern to Mama for a hospital gown. "It'll make things easier for him and for me." Mama got to work right away. The flannel kept him warmer. So did the soft socks Mama knitted.

Papa took her hand one morning and patted it weakly. "God made you a nurse just in time, didn't He? He knew I'd need you."

She kissed his hand and pressed her cheek against it. “I love you, Papa. I wish you didn’t have to go through this.”

“I know where I’m going. I’m not afraid. Mama is going to need you, Hildemara Rose.”

“I’ll stay, Papa.”

“For a while. Not forever.”

* * *

“Morphine puts you to sleep. I don’t want to spend the little time I have left in the arms of Morpheus.” But when the pain grew unbearable, Papa finally relented and allowed Hildie to give him an injection.

She called Cloe. She came home two days later and dumped her suitcases in the screened bedroom they had shared as girls. After an hour sitting by Papa’s bed, she came and found Hildie. “He’s asking for you.”

Hildie prepared the morphine injection.

Mama came and went from the bedroom. She had stopped sleeping with him. “Every time I roll over or move, I’m hurting him.”

When Papa cried in pain, Mama would become agitated. She’d pace, ashen, biting her thumb until it bled. “Can’t you give him something?”

“I have, Mama.”

“Well, it wasn’t enough. You should give him more.”

“Marta . . .” Papa’s voice, barely above a whisper now, always caught Mama’s attention. Glaring at Hildemara, she went back into the bedroom. Papa talked with her softly, in German. Hildie leaned against the sink counter, hands covering her face, trying not to sob.

“You never loved me, Niclas.” Mama spoke in a ragged, grief-soaked voice. “You married me for my money.”

Papa spoke louder this time. “Do you suppose there was money enough in the world to make me marry such an ill-tempered woman?”

Hildie went to the doorway, wanting to cry out to both of them not to waste time arguing, not now, not when it was so close to the end.

“You make jokes at a time like this.” Mama started to rise and Papa caught her wrist. She could easily have broken free, but she didn’t.

“Marta,” he rasped. “Don’t pull away. I haven’t the strength to hold on to you anymore.” When she sagged into the chair and began to weep, Papa turned toward her. “I wouldn’t leave you if God wasn’t

calling me away." He stroked her head, his hand trembling with weakness. When she looked up, he touched her cheek. "I've warmed myself by your fire." He said more to her, softly, in German. She took his hand and held it open against her cheek. Hildemara stepped back and turned away.

How could Mama not know Papa loved her? Hildemara had seen him show it in a thousand ways. She had never heard either Mama or Papa say aloud in front of witnesses, *"I love you,"* but she had never doubted for one moment they did.

Mama came out of the bedroom and motioned Hildemara to go in. Hildie went.

Looking at her wristwatch, she held his hand and prayed until the time came to give him another injection. When she came out, Mama sat at the kitchen table, her head buried in her arms. Hildie didn't know who needed her more, Papa or Mama. She knew how to tend Papa, how to comfort him. But Mama had always been a mystery.

That night, Papa lapsed into a coma. Hildemara stayed in the room, turning him gently every two hours. Mama protested. "What are you doing? Just leave him alone! For heaven's sake, Hildemara, give him peace."

Hildemara wanted to rise up and scream back at Mama. Instead, she went on with her work and spoke as quietly and calmly as possible. "He needs to be turned every two hours, Mama, or he'll develop pressure sores."

Mama helped after that. They worked in shifts. Mama's face looked as white and cold as marble.

The smell of death filled the room. Hildie checked Papa's pulse repeatedly, his breathing. She prayed softly under her breath as she ministered to him. *God, have mercy. God, let it end soon. God, take Papa home. Jesus, Jesus, I can't do this. God, give me strength. Please . . . please, Lord.*

Hildie changed the bed linens and changed his gown. She wondered if people felt pain in a coma. She didn't know whether to give him an injection or not. When she called Dr. Whiting and asked, he said he didn't know.

"It's my turn, Mama."

"No." She spoke firmly. "You've done enough. Go rest. I'll stay a little while longer."

"I'll wake you if—"

Mama shook her head. "Don't argue with me now, Hildemara Rose." She took Papa's hand between hers and whispered raggedly, "Not now."

* * *

Hildie entered the room and knew before she touched his forehead that Papa had gone home. His face looked so serene, all the muscles relaxed. He looked white now instead of gray, the skin taut against cheek and jawbone, eyes closed and sunken. She felt relief and then ashamed that she did. "He's gone, Mama."

"I know."

"When?"

Mama didn't answer. She just sat holding Papa's hand in both of hers, staring down at him.

Hildemara put her hand on Papa's brow and found it cold. She felt the rush of anguish rise up, catching her by the throat, but fought it down.

Papa had gone hours ago, and she couldn't help wondering how much of Mama had gone with him.

* * *

Hildemara wrote to Boots the night after Papa had been taken away to the mortuary. Mama had gone to bed and stayed there all day. Cloe fed the chickens, milked the cow, and saw to the rabbits. When Bernie told Hildie she didn't have to do the chores, she screamed at him that she had to do something or run mad, then fell sobbing into his arms. "Papa's gone. He's gone. I thought he'd live forever."

Mama had already taken care of all the arrangements, of course. No open casket. Papa didn't want it. A simple memorial service at the church for whoever wanted to come. The entire town showed up, along with the last person Hildie ever expected to see.

Trip stood outside the church after the memorial service. Hildie's heart leaped and lodged in her throat. He looked so tall and handsome in a black suit, hat in his hands. He held it by the brim, turning it slowly. People clustered around Mama. Hildemara stayed close by her side, Bernie and Elizabeth on the other, Cloe and Rikka right behind. So many had come: Dr. Whiting and Mrs. King, teachers, school principals, store owners, farmers, the Musashi family. The Herkners came all the way from San Francisco, bringing Fritz with them. Everyone had a story to tell about Papa, memories they wanted to offer.

"Niclas helped plant my orchard . . ."

". . . loved God . . ."

". . . helped us out when we came here from Oklahoma . . ."

". . . knew how to manage a crew of harvesters and let them go at the end of a season with a smile on their faces . . ."

"Always knew I could trust him . . ."

Mama frowned at Hildemara. "Stop squeezing my arm so tight."

Hildie apologized and let her go. She couldn't see Trip among the mourners and wondered if he had already left.

Mama nudged her. "Mr. Endicott is talking to you."

Heat surged into Hildie's cheeks and she thanked him for his kind words. She spotted Trip again on the outer edge of the gathering. "Excuse me, Mama. There's someone I need to speak to, and then I'll be right back." She slipped away, letting Cloe take her place.

She wove her way through the throng of people, accepting condolences, trying to keep moving toward Trip. When she finally reached him, she couldn't speak. She opened her mouth and closed it like a fish drowning in the air.

His eyes glistened with tears. "I'm sorry about your father, Hildemara. I would like to have met him."

His words reminded her of her sin of omission. She had never once mentioned Trip to Papa. "Thank you for coming." How had he known about the memorial service? Boots had taken a job in Los Angeles last month.

He seemed to read her mind. "Boots called and told me."

Hildie glanced back at Mama, afraid Trip might see more in her face than she wanted him to know. She loved him so much, she wanted to cry out at the pain of seeing him again.

"You look tired, Hildie."

"I am." *Bone tired. Soul tired.* "So is Mama."

"Can I meet her?" When Hildie hesitated, his mouth tipped. "Don't worry. I won't say anything about us."

*Us.*

The crowd thinned enough for them to make their way easily to where Mama stood with Bernie, Elizabeth, Cloe, and Rikka. "Mama, I'd like you to meet a friend from Merritt." She introduced Trip as Cale Arundel. Trip extended his hand and spoke gently to Mama, holding hers in both of his. Mama thanked him for coming so far and looked at Hildemara, as though for further explanation in why he would.

“Come on, Mama.” Bernie took her hand and drew it through his arm while giving Hildemara a pointed glance. “We should go home.”

Trip touched Hildemara lightly on the arm. “Walk with me to my car?”

“I’ll be right there, Bernie.”

As Trip guided her, his hand slid down her arm and clasped her hand. She slipped free. When they stopped by his car, she raised her head. “It was very kind of you to come so far, Trip.”

“I could drive you home. It would give us a few minutes to talk.”

“I can’t.” Her voice broke.

“Are you coming back?”

“I don’t know.” Tears slipped down her cheeks and she impatiently brushed them away.

After the difficult months of watching Papa die, her emotions were in a state of confusion. She couldn’t go back to Oakland and pick up her life where she had left off. It seemed almost immoral to do such a thing when so many were dying, when Papa had only just been laid in his grave. She couldn’t leave Mama alone. Rikka would be off with Melvin. Cloe would be back in Hollywood, neck-deep in costume design and dating her producer. Bernie and Elizabeth couldn’t do all the work, could they? Someone had to stay and take care of Mama. But that wasn’t all that churned in her mind. The war! Everyone talked about the war. Men died in wars. Better not to love Trip any more than she already did. No one knew what tomorrow might bring.

“No. I don’t think I will. Not now. Mama needs me.” She couldn’t look at him, knowing everything she felt would be written across her face. She saw Mama staring at her from the front seat. “I have to go, Trip.” She stepped back. “Say hello to everyone. Tell them I miss them.”

When she slid into the car, Mama didn’t look at her. She sat, back straight, eyes staring forward in the front passenger seat. Bernie started the car. “Where’s Rikka?”

Cloe was staring at Hildie. “She’s riding home with Melvin.”

Bernie glanced back from the driver’s seat. “Is Cale following us to the house?”

“No.” Before anyone could ask if she had invited him, she went on quickly. “He has a long drive home to Oakland.” She looked out the window, hoping no one would see her tears or mention him again.

“Seemed like a nice guy, what little I could tell from the one minute he was with us.”

"He's better-looking than most of the actors I've met," Cloe added, not smiling, still staring, a faint frown on her face.

"All the women in the hospital were in love with him."

"And he came all the way to Murietta—"

"Shut up, Bernie." It was Cloe who said it.

Mama didn't utter a sound.

When all the visitors left, Mama went to bed. When Hildie looked in on her later, Mama lay on her back, wide-awake, staring at the ceiling. "Do you want me to sit with you awhile, Mama?"

"No."

Hildie fell asleep on the couch. She awakened with the moonlight streaming through the window. She thought she heard someone screaming outside. She rose quickly and looked in on Mama. She wasn't in her bed. Throwing on her coat, she flew out the back door. The screaming came from the orchard. Bernie stood in the yard. "Is it Mama?"

"Yes." He caught her by the arm. "Leave her alone. She has to get it out someway." She could see the sheen of tears on his face. "She's held it in too long. Let her scream. Let her pound on the earth."

Hildemara could hear her. "She's cursing God."

"For tonight, and then she'll be holding on to Him when she's finished. Go on back to the house. She'll come in when she's ready."

"What're you going to do?"

"Papa told me to watch over her."

## Hoofstuk 34

Saans, wanneer Pappa bed toe is, sit Hildie en Mamma by die kombuistafel. Sy lees Bybel terwyl Mamma briewe skryf. Vandat Hildie kon onthou, skryf haar ma vir Rosie Brechtwald. Al wat Hildie weet, is dat Mamma en Rosie skoolmaats was. Daar is nog mense met wie Mamma korrespondeer, en rondom Kersfees ontvang sy gewoonlik briewe van Felda Braun, Warner Brennholtz en Solange en Herve Fournier, almal in Switserland. Mamma het altyd die seëls afgeknip en hulle vir Bernie gegee. Haar broer het eenmaal gevra hoekom Mamma vir mense skryf wat sy nooit weer gaan sien nie. “Ek sien hulle hier.” Sy het na haar kop gewys. “En hier.” Sy het aan haar hart geraak.

“En as die Here wil, sal ons hulle op die dag sien wanneer die laaste trompet blaas,” het Pappa bygevoeg.

Hildie en Mamma sê nie veel vir mekaar nie. Voordat Hildie bed toe gaan, plaas sy haar hand op Mamma sê skouer en sê nag. Soms antwoord Mamma.

Nadat Hildie ’n week by die huis was, staan sy eendag vroeg op en wag vir Mamma by die kombuistafel. “Ek wil dokter Whiting gaan sien, Mamma.”

“Hoekom? Hy sal die einde van die week uitkom plaas toe.”

“Pappa het iets nodig vir die pyn.”

Mamma skink vir haar koffie en kom sit by die tafel. “Hy sal dit nie drink nie, Hildemara. Hy het gesê hy wil nie sy laaste maande op aarde te bedwelmd wees om helder te dink nie.”

“Hy kan dalk van plan verander.”

Mamma laat sak haar kop. “Jy ken jou pa.”

“Ek moet gereed wees, net vir ingeval.”

“Jy kan met die motor gaan.”

Hildie gee ’n laggie. “Ek sou as ek geweet het hoe om te bestuur. Ek loop sommer.”

“Hoekom het jy nooit geleer nie? ’n Verpleegster kry ’n goeie salaris, nie waar nie? Clotilde het tydens haar eerste week in Burbank ’n motor gekoop toe sy as vakleerling begin kostuums maak het. Selfs

Rikka weet hoe om te bestuur."

"Ek het 'n blok van die hospitaal af gebly, en as ek iewers anders heen wou gaan, was daar altyd 'n bus wat in dieselfde rigting geloop het. Een van die dae sal ek leer."

"Ek kan jou leer."

"Dis nie nou die tyd nie." Hildie se hande span om haar koppie en sy staar na haar koffie terwyl sy praat. "Ons sal moet saamwerk, Mamma, en hom so gemaklik moontlik maak."

Mamma sit haar beker hard neer. "Ek wil hom nie gemaklik hê nie. Ek wil hê hy moet lewe."

"Ek's 'n verpleegster. Nie God nie."

"Het ek gesê jy is? Vra ek meer van jou as waarvoor jy opgelei is?"

Hildie skuif haar stoel terug, tel haar koppie en piering op en sit hulle op die toonbank neer. "Ek sal hulle later was." Sy loop na die agterdeur.

"Waarnatoe gaan jy?"

"Na dokter Whiting toe."

"Dis nog nie eens lig nie."

"Dit sal lig genoeg wees as ek daar kom."

"Kom sit tog dat ek vir jou ontbyt maak."

"Ek sal by die kafee eet."

"Jy kan so 'n dwaas wees, Hildemara!"

Hildie se hele liggaam bewe toe sy in die deur vassteek en na haar kyk. "Wees kwaad, Mamma. Wees rasend van woede! Maar wees kwaad vir die kanker!" Sy maak die deur agter haar toe.

Met haar jas styf om haar gevou begin Hildie dorp toe loop. Sy neem haar tyd, teug aan die vars oggendlug, die reuk van klam grond en wingerde, die geur van die bloekoms en luister na die water wat by Grand Junction kolk. Sy gaan staan by die plek waar die huis was wat haar broer en Fritz afgebrand het. Iemand het die eiendom gekoop en 'n nuwe huis en skuur gebou.

Die ligte van die kafee is aan. Sy herken die kelnerin. "Jy's Dorothy Pietrowski, nie waar nie? Jy was saam met my broer, Bernard Waltert, op skool."

"O, ja." Die plomp donkerkopmeisie glimlag. "Ek onthou hom: 'n groot, aantreklike, blonde ou met blou oë. Al die meisies was verlief op hom. Elizabeth Kenney het ook al die geluk." Haar glimlag vervaag. "Ek kan jou nie onthou nie."

"Nie baie mense kan nie." Hildie glimlag en steek haar hand uit om haarself voor te stel.

Dorothy blyk glad nie haastig te wees om haar bestelling te neem nie. “Jou pa is mos siek.”

“Hoe weet jy?”

“Die mense praat. My pa het groot respek vir hom, selfs al is hy ’n –” Sy bloos bloedrooi. “Jammer.”

“’n Hun?” Hildie lag dit af. “Ons het almal ons Amerikaanse burgerskap gekry en is trots daarop. Ons het selfs klein inhuldigingsvlaggies en dokumente om dit te bewys.”

“Mense kan so simpel wees.” Dis duidelik dat Dorothy nie haarself insluit nie. Sy trek haar skouers op. “Wat kan ek vanoggend vir jou aanbied, Hildemara?”

“Die boere-ontbyt.” Eiers, spek, wors, gebraaide aartappelblokkies, roosterbrood, lemoensap en baie koppies warm koffie.

Dorothy lag toe sy haar potlood agter haar oor indruk. “Ek bring nou.”

Hildie onthou hoe Mamma en Pappa gepraat het van die oorlog om alle oorloë te beëindig. Sy onthou die jaar toe die Herkners se bakkery afgebrand het. Dit het nie net oor besigheid gegaan nie. Mense kom nie ná ’n oorlog huis toe en verwerk dit binne ’n dag of selfs ’n jaar nie. Vir sommige mense maak dit nie saak hoe lank ’n familie in die land was of hoe lank gelede hulle hulle burgerskapstoets afgelê het nie. Al wat saak maak, is waar hulle vandaan kom. En Pappa kom van Duitsland af.

Dorothy kom met ’n paar borde wat sy voor Hildie neersit. “Dis ’n wonder dat jy so maer is.” Sy kom terug om Hildemara se koffie aan te vul. Hulle praat elke keer wanneer sy terugkom. Uiteindelik skuif Dorothy oorkant haar in en vertel haar hoe Murietta nooit verander nie. Dalk is dit goed; dalk is dit sleg. Hildie vertel haar van haar verpleegopleiding, haar werk by Samuel Merritt en die mense wat sy ontmoet het. Al waaroor sy nie praat nie is Trip Arundel. Die klokkie lui.

“Nou begin dit besig word.” Dorothy skuif uit die bankie. “Dit was lekker om met jou te gesels.” Sy neem die koffiepot. “Ek hoop jy kom maak weer ’n draai.”

“Ek het dit ook geniet, maar ek dink nie ek sal vir die volgende ruk veel uit die huis kom nie.”

***

Daar is trane in dokter Whiting se oë waar hy agter sy lessenaar sit. "Hy is 'n trotse man, Hildemara. En hardkoppig. Natuurlik sal ek vir jou gee wat jy nodig het. Die kanker versprei vinniger as wat ek verwag het, maar dalk is dit 'n goeie ding, as jy verstaan wat ek bedoel."

Hildemara knik. "Dit gaan nie lank wees nie, dokter Whiting."

"Ek neem aan jy het genoeg kankerlyers in die hospitaal gesien om die tekens te herken." Hy maak 'n toring met sy vingerpunte en sit 'n oomblik en dink. Hildemara pols hom nie. Die dokter staan op en loop uit. 'n Paar minute later kom hy terug en plaas 'n klein dosie op die lessenaar tussen hulle. "Morfien. Genoeg dosisse om onder normale omstandighede 'n week te hou. Ek sal nog bestel. Jou pa gaan dit aanvanklik weier, Hildemara. As hy dit doen, moet jy hom vra hoe dit vir hom sou wees om te sien hoe iemand wat hy liefhet, 'n langsame, pynlike dood sterf. As hy eers sy eerste inspuiting in het, sal hy die volgende keer minder baklei. Hy sal jou dalk selfs vra. Dit is een van die mees verslawende middels waarvan ons weet, maar onder hierdie omstandighede maak dit nie saak nie."

Hildemara sluk haar trane toe sy opstaan. "Dankie, Dokter." Sy neem die botteltjies. "Watter dosis skryf u voor?"

"Ek laat dit aan jou oor." Dokter Whiting maak keel skoon. "Gee jy vir Niclas soveel as wat jy dink hy nodig het. As alles verby is, belowe ek dat ek nie jou oordeel in twyfel sal trek nie."

Dit neem 'n paar sekondes voordat sy besef wat hy bedoel. Dit voel asof haar bene onder haar gaan ingee. "Ek kan dit nie doen nie."

"Dis wat jy nou sê."

"Ek sal nie!"

Dokter Whiting staan op en loop om sy lessenaar om haar 'n drukkie te gee. Hy klop haar op die rug terwyl sy huil. Toe sy weer beheer oor haar emosies kry, maak hy die deur oop en loop saam met haar deur die wagkamer. "Ek sal aan die einde van die week uitkom plaas toe."

Hildemara stap huis toe en dit voel asof daar 'n stuk lood eerder as 'n wit boksie met botteltjies morfien in haar handsak is.

***

Smiddae sit Mamma by Pappa. Hildemara weet dat hulle tyd alleen nodig het en gaan kuier dan gewoonlik vir Elizabeth. Die kothuis wat Pappa en Bernie gebou het, het 'n sementfondament en binnemuurse

riool. Daar is ’n groot wit stoof in die kombuis en aan weerskante twee werkoppervlakke. Daar is ’n yskas in plaas van ’n outydse ysboks, ’n badkamer met wasbak, toilet en ’n bad met ’n stortkop. Die woonkamer is nie groot nie, maar gesellig met ’n opsitbankie en stoel, ’n koffietafel, sytafel, twee lampe en ’n radio wat Elizabeth aangeskakel hou. Buiten dat daar net een slaapkamer is, is dit net so groot soos die huis wat Hildie met Boots gedeel het.

“Op die oomblik is dit ideaal vir ons.” Elizabeth kyk om haar rond. Sy straal steeds soos ’n nuwe bruid. “Maar ons sal moet aanbou wanneer ons kinders het.”

Hildemara kyk weg. “Jy het groen vingers. Kyk net al daardie blomme in die blombakke en die skuur.”

Elizabeth lag. “Wie sou kon dink dat ek goed sou wees met iets so deugsaam soos om dinge te laat groei?” Sy raak ernstig. “Ek kan net nie meer wag om ’n kindjie in my te voel groei nie.” Sy bloos en kyk af. “Ons probeer. Ons hoop om goeie nuus te hê voordat Pappa ... ” Toe sy opkyk, is haar oë blink van die trane. “’n Babatjie sal hom opbeur, dink jy nie so nie?”

Hildemara kyk af in haar koffie.

Elizabeth leun oor en plaas haar hand op Hildie se arm. “Ek’s so bly jy’s by die huis, Hildie. Ek het jou gemis.” Sy gee haar arm ’n drukkie en laat haar gaan. “Ek weet dis vreeslik om te erken, maar ek was doodbang dat jou ma van my sou verwag om te help om Pappa te versorg. Ek weet niks van verpleging af nie, en om die waarheid te sê kan Mamma by tye ’n bietjie intimiderend wees.”

Hildie glimlag vir haar. “By tye? ’n Bietjie? Sy intimideer my nog steeds op ’n daaglikse basis.”

“Jou ma is ongelooflik, Hildie. Sy weet net soveel van boerdery af as jou pa. Sy het Bernie ’n lys gegee van alles wat wanneer en hoe gedoen moet word, en wie gekontak moet word wanneer die amandels en rosyntjies moet mark toe gaan. Sy het dit alles in haar joernaal aangeteken.”

Hildemara weet dat Pappa hom nie oor die plaas bekommer nie. Hy het nou die dag gesê dat hy volle vertroue in Bernie het. Hy sal alles vir Mamma kan bestuur, as Mamma hom toelaat. Nou kan sy nie anders as om te wonder of Mamma besig is om voorbereidings vir Pappa se heengaan te tref nie, maar sy durf nie vra nie.

***

Boots skryf.

> *Ek het nou die dag vir Trip gesien. Hy het my oor jou en jou pa uitgevra. Hy vra of jy van plan is om na Merritt toe terug te kom. Ek het vir hom gesê dat ek nie weet nie, en jy waarskynlik ook nie. Jy moet vir hom skryf, Flo. Die arme ou lyk soos 'n verlore siel.*

Hildie skraap haar moed bymekaar en skryf vir Trip. Sy hou die brief kort. En konsentreer op Pappa en Mamma, Bernie en Elizabeth, hoe dit voel om na vier jaar weer in die huis te wees, hoe min haar tuisdorp verander het. Een bladsy. 'n Week later kom haar brief terug gemerk: *Geen nastuuradres nie*.

***

Met verloop van tyd verloor Pappa sy skaamte. Hildemara was hom en sorg dat sy bed vars oorgetrek bly. Sy gee vir Mamma 'n patroon vir 'n hospitaaljurk. "Dit sal die rondskuiwery vir ons albei makliker maak." Mamma spring dadelik aan die werk. Die flennie hou hom warmer. Dit en die sagte sokkies wat Mamma gebrei het.

Een oggend neem Pappa haar hand en druk dit floutjies. "Die Here het jou net betyds 'n verpleegster gemaak, nè, my kind. Hy het geweet dat ek jou sou nodig hê."

Sy soen sy hand en hou dit teen haar wang. "Ek is lief vir Pappa. Ek wens dit was nie nodig dat Pappa hierdeur moes gaan nie."

"Ek weet waarheen ek gaan. Ek's nie bang nie. Mamma gaan jou nodig hê, Hildemara Rose."

"Ek sal bly, Pappa."

"Vir 'n rukkie. Nie vir altyd nie."

***

"Morfien laat 'n mens slaap. Ek wil nie die bietjie tyd wat ek nog hier is, in die arms van Morfeus deurbring nie." Maar toe die pyn ondraaglik word, laat Pappa Hildie uiteindelik toe om hom 'n inspuiting te gee.

Sy bel vir Cloe. Sy kom twee dae later huis toe en laat val haar tasse in die stoepkamer wat hulle as dogtertjies gedeel het. Nadat sy 'n uur langs Pappa se bed gesit het, kom soek sy na Hildie. "Hy vra na jou."

Hildie begin die morfieninspuiting voorberei.

Mamma kom en gaan uit die kamer. Sy slaap nie meer by hom nie. “Elke keer wat ek omdraai, maak ek hom seer.”

Toe Pappa huil van die pyn, word Mamma rusteloos. Sy loop op en af en byt haar duim totdat dit bloei. “Kan jy hom nie iets gee nie?” Sy is vaal van bleekheid.

“Ek het, Mamma.”

“Wel, dit was nie genoeg nie. Jy moet hom meer gee.”

“Marta ... ” Al is Pappa se stem nou skaars meer as ’n fluistering, hoor Mamma altyd as hy haar roep. Sy gluur na Hildemara en gaan terug kamer toe. Pappa praat sag met haar in Duits. Hildie leun teen die wasbak, druk haar gesig in haar hande en probeer om nie te snik nie.

“Jy was nooit lief vir my nie, Niclas.” Mamma praat in ’n gebroke, gepynigde stem. “Jy het met my getrou vir my geld.”

Hierdie keer praat Pappa harder. “Dink jy daar is genoeg geld in die wêreld wat my met so ’n humeurige vrou sou laat trou?”

Hildie gaan staan in die deur. Sy wil op hulle albei skree om nie hulle tyd met argumente te vermors nie, nie nou nie, nie noudat die einde so naby is nie.

“Hoe kan jy op so ’n tyd wil grappies maak?” Mamma begin opstaan, maar Pappa se hand sluit om haar gewrig. Sy kon maklik losgeruk het, maar sy doen dit nie.

“Marta,” kom dit skor. “Moet my nie wegstoot nie. Ek het nie meer die krag om aan jou vas te hou nie.” Toe sy op die stoel neersak en begin huil, draai Pappa na haar. “Ek sou nie van jou af weggegaan het as die Here my nie weggeroep het nie.” Sy hand is bewerig toe hy oor haar kop streel. Toe sy opkyk, raak hy aan haar wang. “Ek het my by jou vuur warm gemaak.” Hy praat weer sag in Duits met haar. Sy neem sy hand en hou dit oop teen haar wang. Hildemara tree terug en draai weg.

Hoe kan Mamma nie weet dat Pappa vir haar lief is nie? Hildemara het hom dit op ’n duisend maniere sien wys. Sy het nog nooit gehoor dat Mamma of Pappa die woorde “*ek het jou lief*” voor ander mense sê nie. Maar sy het nog nooit vir ’n oomblik daaraan getwyfel nie.

Mamma kom uit die kamer en wys dat Hildemara moet ingaan. Hildie maak so.

Sy kyk kort-kort op haar horlosie toe sy sy hand vashou en bid totdat dit weer tyd is vir ’n inspuiting. Toe sy uitkom, sit Mamma by die kombuistafel, haar kop op haar arms. Hildie weet nie wie haar die nodigste het nie, Pappa of Mamma. Sy weet hoe om Pappa te versorg.

Maar Mamma was nog altyd ’n misterie.

Daardie nag gaan Pappa in ’n koma. Hildemara bly in die kamer en draai hom elke twee ure om. Mamma protesteer. “Wat maak jy? Hoekom los jy hom nie? Om hemelsnaam, Hildemara, laat hom met rus.”

Hildemara wil opstaan en op haar ma skree. In plaas daarvan gaan sy aan met haar werk en praat so sag en kalm moontlik. “Hy moet elke twee ure omgedraai word, Mamma, anders gaan hy bedsere kry.”

Daarna help haar ma. Hulle werk in skofte. Mamma se gesig is so wit en koud soos ’n stuk marmer.

Die reuk van die dood kom hang in die vertrek. Hildie neem Pappa se pols elke paar minute en monitor sy asemhaling. Sy bid sag terwyl sy hom versorg. *Here, wees genadig. Here, laat dit gou verby wees. God, neem Pappa huis toe. Jesus, Jesus, ek kan dit nie doen nie. Here, gee my krag. Asseblief … asseblief, Here*.

Hildie trek die bed skoon oor. Sy wonder of mense in ’n koma kan pyn voel. Sy weet nie of sy hom ’n inspuiting moet gee of nie. Toe sy dokter Whiting bel en vra, sê hy dat hy nie weet nie.

“Dis my beurt, Mamma.”

“Nee.” Haar stem is ferm. “Jy het genoeg gedoen. Gaan rus. Ek sal nog ’n bietjie langer bly.”

“Ek sal Mamma wakker maak as – ”

Mamma skud haar kop. “Moenie nou met my stry nie, Hildemara Rose.” Sy neem Pappa se hand tussen hare en fluister rukkerig. “Nie nou nie.”

***

Hildie kom in en nog voordat sy aan sy voorkop geraak het, weet sy dat Pappa nie meer daar is nie. Daar is soveel vrede op sy gesig, en al sy spiere is ontspanne. Hy lyk nou wit in plaas van grys, sy vel styf oor sy wangbene en kake, sy oë gesluit en ingesonke. Sy voel verlig en dan skaam daaroor. “Hy is weg, Mamma.”

“Ek weet.”

“Wanneer?”

Mamma antwoord nie. Sy sit net met Pappa se hand in hare na hom en staar.

Toe Hildemara haar hand op Pappa se voorkop plaas, is dit koud. Sy voel hoe die benoudheid en smart in haar opstoot en haar aan die keel

gryp, maar baklei daarteen.

Pappa is ure gelede al weg, en sy kan nie anders as om te wonder hoeveel van Mamma saam met hom gegaan het nie.

***

Hildemara skryf aan Boots die nag nadat Pappa lykshuis toe geneem is. Mamma het bed toe gegaan en die hele dag daar gebly. Cloe voer die hoenders en die hase en melk die koei. Toe Bernie vir Hildie sê dat sy niks hoef te doen nie, ontplof sy en sê dat sy gaan mal word as sy niks doen nie, en dan val sy snikkend in sy arms. "Pappa is dood. Hy's dood. Ek het gedink hy gaan vir altyd lewe."

Mamma het natuurlik alreeds al die reëlings getref. Daar sal nie 'n oop kis wees nie. Pappa wou dit nie hê nie. 'n Eenvoudige gedenkdiens by die kerk vir wie ook al wil kom. Die hele dorp daag daar op, saam met die laaste persoon wat Hildie verwag het om daar te sien.

Na die diens staan Trip buitekant die kerk. Hildie se hart mis 'n slag en steek vas in haar keel. Hy lyk so lank en aantreklik in sy swart pak, sy hoed in sy hande. Hy hou dit aan die rand vas en draai dit stadig in die rondte. Die mense drom saam rondom Mamma en Hildemara bly aan haar sy, Bernie en Elizabeth aan die anderkant, Cloe en Rikka reg agter haar. So baie mense het gekom: dokter Whiting en mevrou King, onderwysers, skoolhoofde, winkeleienaars, boere, die Musashi-familie. Die Herkners het al die pad van San Francisco af gekom en Fritz saam met hulle gebring. Almal het 'n storie oor Pappa, 'n herinnering wat hulle wil deel.

"Niclas het my gehelp om my boord aan te plant ... "

" ... was lief vir die Here ... "

" ... het ons gehelp toe ons van Oklahoma af gekom het ... "

" ... het geweet hoe om met 'n span arbeiders te werk en hulle aan die einde van die oestyd met 'n glimlag op hulle gesigte te laat gaan ... "

"Altyd geweet ek kon hom vertrou ... "

Mamma frons vir Hildemara. "Moenie my arm so styf vashou nie."

Hildie vra om verskoning en los haar arm. Sy kan Trip nie tussen al die rouklaers sien nie en wonder of hy reeds geloop het.

Mamma du haar in die sy. "Meneer Endicott praat met jou."

Hildie se wange brand toe sy hom vir sy mooi woorde bedank. Dan

sien sy Trip weer tussen die agterste begrafnisgangers. "Verskoon my, Mamma. Daar is iemand met wie ek moet praat, dan kom ek dadelik terug." Sy glip weg en Cloe neem haar plek.

Sy vleg deur die mense en probeer te midde van vele simpatiebetuigings nader aan Trip beweeg. Toe sy uiteindelik by hom kom, kan sy nie praat nie. Sy maak haar mond oop en toe soos 'n vis op droë grond.

Sy oë blink van die trane. "Ek's jammer oor jou pa, Hildemara. Ek sou hom graag wou ontmoet het."

Sy woorde laat haar opnuut sleg voel oor die feit dat sy haar pa nooit van Trip vertel het nie. "Dankie dat jy gekom het." Hoe het hy van die gedenkdiens geweet? Boots het verlede maand 'n pos in Los Angeles aanvaar.

Dis asof hy haar gedagtes lees. "Boots het gebel en vir my gesê."

Hildie kyk terug na Mamma, bang dat Trip meer op haar gesig sal sien as wat sy wil hê hy moet weet. Sy het hom so lief, sy wil huil oor die seer wat die weersiens in haar wakker maak.

"Jy lyk moeg, Hildie."

"Ek is." *Doodmoeg. Sielsmoeg.* "Mamma ook."

"Kan ek haar ontmoet?" Toe Hildemara aarsel, lig sy mondhoeke. "Moenie bang wees nie. Ek sal haar nie van ons vertel nie."

*Ons*.

Die mense is besig om minder te raak en hulle loop sonder oponthoud na waar Mamma by Bernie, Elizabeth, Cloe en Rikka staan. "Mamma, ek wil Mamma graag voorstel aan 'n vriend van Merritt." Sy stel Trip as Cale Arundel voor. Trip steek sy hand uit en praat sag met Mamma terwyl hy hare in al twee syne vashou. Mamma sê dankie dat hy so ver gekom het en kyk na Hildemara asof vir 'n verduideliking oor waarom hy dit sou doen.

"Kom, Mamma." Bernie neem haar hand en trek dit deur sy arm terwyl hy Hildemara 'n veelbetekenende kyk gee. "Ons moet huis toe gaan."

Trip raak sag aan Hildemara se arm. "Sal jy saam met my kar toe loop?"

"Ek's nou daar, Bernie."

Terwyl Trip saam met haar na die kar toe loop, beweeg sy hand teen haar arm af en vleg hy sy vingers deur hare. Sy maak haar los. Toe hulle by sy kar gaan staan, kyk sy op. "Dit was baie dierbaar van jou om so ver te kom, Trip."

"Ek kan jou huis toe neem. Dit sal ons 'n paar minute gee om te

praat."

"Ek kan nie." Haar stem breek.

"Gaan jy terugkom?"

"Ek weet nie." Die trane loop oor haar wange en sy vee hulle ongeduldig af.

Na die moeilike maande waarin sy Pappa sien doodgaan het, is haar emosies in 'n totale warboel. Sy kan nie na Oakland toe teruggaan en soos altyd met haar lewe aangaan nie. Dit voel amper immoreel om so iets te doen met so baie mense wat doodgaan, met Pappa wat pas in sy graf gelê is. Sy kan Mamma nie alleen laat nie. Rikka en Melvin gaan nie lank bly nie. Cloe gaan in Hollywood wees, toegegooi onder haar kostuumontwerpe en verhouding met haar vervaardiger. Bernie en Elizabeth sal nie al die werk kan behartig nie. Iemand moet bly om na Mamma te kyk. Maar dis nie net dit wat in haar gedagtes kolk nie. Die oorlog! Almal praat van die oorlog. Mans sneuwel in oorloë. Dit sal beter wees om nie nog liewer vir Trip te raak as wat sy reeds is nie. 'n Mens weet nooit wat die toekoms inhou nie.

"Nee, ek dink nie ek sal nie. Nie nou nie. Mamma het my nodig." Sy kan nie na hom kyk nie. Alles wat sy voel, sal oor haar gesig geskryf staan. Sy kan Mamma vanuit die passasiersitplek na haar sien kyk. "Ek moet gaan, Trip." Sy staan terug. "Stuur groete vir almal. Sê ek mis hulle."

Toe sy by die motor inskuif, kyk Mamma nie na haar nie. Sy sit met 'n regop rug en kyk reguit voor haar. Bernie skakel die motor aan. "Waar's Rikka?"

Cloe staar na Hildie. "Sy ry saam met Melvin."

Bernie kyk om. "Ry Cale agter ons aan huis toe?"

"Nee." Voordat enigiemand kan vra of sy hom genooi het, vervolg sy vinnig. "Dis ver terug Oakland toe." Sy kyk deur die venster en hoop dat niemand haar trane sien of weer na hom verwys nie.

"Hy lyk soos 'n oulike ou – die bietjie wat ek kon aflei uit die minuut wat hy by ons was."

"Hy is aantrekliker as meeste van die akteurs wat ek al ontmoet het," sê Cloe. Sy glimlag nog steeds nie, maar sit met 'n effense frons na Hildie en kyk.

"Al die vroue in die hospitaal was op hom verlief."

"En hy het al die pad Murietta toe gekom – "

"Bly stil, Bernie." Dis Cloe wat dit sê.

Mamma sê nie 'n woord nie.

Toe al die besoekers weg is, gaan Mamma bed toe. Toe Hildie later

by haar gaan inloer, lê Mamma helder wakker op haar rug en staar na die plafon. “Wil Mamma hê ek moet ’n rukkie hier by Ma sit?”

“Nee.”

Hildie raak op die bank aan die slaap. Die maanlig val deur die venster toe sy wakker word. Sy het gedink sy hoor iemand buite skree. Sy staan vinnig op en gaan kyk in Mamma se kamer. Sy is nie in haar bed nie. Nadat sy haar jas aangepluk het, vlieg sy by die agterdeur uit. Die gegil kom uit die boord. Bernie staan op die werf. “Is dit Mamma?”

“Ja.” Hy keer haar aan die arm. “Los haar. Sy moet dit op een of ander manier uitkry.” Sy kan die blink traanspore op sy wange sien. “Sy het dit vir te lank binnegehou. Laat haar skree. Laat haar op die grond slaan.”

Hildemara kan haar hoor. “Sy vloek die Here.”

“Vir vannag, en wanneer sy klaar is, sal sy aan Hom vashou. Gaan terug huis toe. Sy sal inkom as sy gereed is.”

“Wat gaan jy doen?”

“Pappa het my gevra om na haar te kyk.”

## Chapter 35

**1941**

Papa hadn't been in his grave a week before Mama went back to work. She got up at dawn and made the coffee, then went out to milk the cow, feed the chickens, and collect eggs. Cloe went back to Hollywood. Rikka went back to school. Bernie saw to the business of the farm. Elizabeth tended the flats of seedlings in the lattice nursery and kept the vegetable garden weeded and bug-free.

People continued to come to visit, and everyone brought something: casseroles; cakes; German potato salad; small jars of homemade jams and jellies; pickled watermelon rinds; large jars of apricots, peaches, and cherries. Over the years, Mama had taken gifts to families in need, and now she reaped what she had sowed in kindness.

Edgy with nothing to do, Hildemara set to work on the house. She scrubbed the kitchen floor, took everything out of the cabinets and scrubbed the shelves, scoured the stove and sink. She scraped peeling paint and decided it was time to freshen things up a little. She used some of her savings to buy a cheerful yellow paint, the same color Mama had originally chosen and which had faded over the years. Elizabeth had made pretty curtains for the cottage. Why shouldn't Mama have some? Hildemara bought fabric and enlisted Elizabeth's help in redoing the living room, kitchen, and bedroom curtains. She added lacy sheers so Mama could open the windows and not have dust blow in or sunlight fade the sofa after she and Elizabeth recovered it with a chintz slipcover. She made pretty decorative pillows of blue and yellow with lacy edges. Mama had never had any before.

Mama still cooked. Hildemara sent away for a Quaker lace tablecloth. She put a fresh bouquet of flowers on the table every few days.

If Mama noticed any of the changes, she never said. Hildemara didn't know whether it lightened Mama's grief or not.

She took out the ragbag and started work on an area rug. The mix of colors would brighten the living room. When she wrote to Cloe and told her what she planned, Cloe sent a box of fabric pieces. The work filled Hildemara's long, quiet evenings. She had to work or she couldn't sleep. She grieved over Papa, worried about Mama.

And she couldn't get Trip out of her head.

Even when she fell exhausted into bed, she had trouble sleeping. She'd lie awake, wondering what he was doing, if he had met someone. Of course, he would. She couldn't go back. She couldn't leave Mama by herself.

Mama put her book down one evening and shook her head. "That rug will take months to finish, Hildemara. Why did you start it?"

"Because it'll brighten the living room. Look at all the colors, Mama. If we went to the movies, we'd see some of these fabrics in costumes. Rikka is going to paint a picture of the Alps for you. We'll hang it right there on the wall. It'll add—"

"This is my house, Hildemara. Not yours."

Hildie gasped as she stabbed her finger with the needle. Wincing, she sucked at the wound. "I know, Mama. I'm only trying to fix things up a bit, make it more—"

"I like the yellow walls. I like the new curtains. But enough is enough."

"You don't want the rug?" Hildemara couldn't stop the hurt from rising inside her. "What am I supposed to do with all this—?"

"Just leave it in the box."

"The rug is—"

"Big enough for under the sink."

Hildemara's eyes flooded. "What are you trying to say, Mama?" She knew, but she wanted to hear it aloud. She wanted it out in the open.

"I don't need a servant, Hildemara. And I certainly don't need a nurse!"

Her words cut deeply. "You don't need me. Isn't that what you're trying to say?"

Emotion rippled across Mama's face, like a storm over water, and then her face hardened. "All right, Hildemara Rose. If that's what it takes, I will say it. I don't need you. I don't want you here. The sooner you leave, the better for both of us!"

*Leave? And go where?* Hildemara's face crumpled. "You were the one who asked me to come home!"

"To take care of Papa! And you did, and he's gone now. I can take care of myself!"

"I only want to help."

"No. You want to play the martyr."

"That's not true!"

"Then what else could it be? Why stay two months, and do all

the things you've always hated?"

"I didn't want you to be alone!" She burst into tears.

"Last time I looked, Bernie and Elizabeth lived a few hundred feet from my back door." Mama gripped the arms of her chair. "You trained to be a nurse. You told me that's what you wanted to do with you life! So why are you still here? Why haven't you gone back to nursing? You had your own life before I asked for your help. Your help isn't needed anymore. Why are you still here?" She rose, face twisting. *"Go live your life and let me get on with mine!"* She went into the bedroom she had shared with Papa and slammed the door.

Dumping the rug into the remnant box, Hildemara ran out the back door and into Bernie's old bedroom. Covering her head, she sobbed. *Go back? Go back to what?* She'd ended things with Trip. If there had ever been a chance for happiness, it had ended that day he came to the memorial service. If she went back to Merritt, she might see him again. Some other girl would have certainly said yes. How could she bear to see him again? And now Mama showed her true feelings. Mama couldn't wait to be rid of her.

What had she expected?

Packing her suitcases, she took a shower and went over to talk to Bernie and Elizabeth. "I need a ride in the morning."

"Where you going?"

"Back to Oakland."

She couldn't sleep that night. She went into the kitchen and fixed the coffee.

Mama came out. "You're up early."

"I'm leaving this morning."

"You want something to eat before you go?"

If Hildie had hoped Mama would change her mind, she had her answer. "No, thank you."

Mama poured herself a cup of coffee. "I'll get dressed and drive you to the bus station."

"Bernie's taking me."

"Oh." She sat and let out a long breath. "Well, suit yourself."

When it was time to leave, Hildemara stood in the back doorway. "Good-bye, Mama."

"Write."

As Bernie turned out on the road going by the front of the house, she saw Mama standing on the porch. She lifted her hand. Hildie felt little comfort in the small gesture.

“Sorry, Hildie.” Bernie drove like Mama—fast, confident, head up with eyes straight ahead. “Are you going to be okay?” He gave her a quick glance.

“Right as rain.” Miss Jones had said she would hold her job. As to the rest, she would have to wait and see how much suffering she could bear before she ran.

* * *

With Boots gone, Hildie had no place to live. Mrs. Kaufman gave her a place at Farrelly Hall. “You can stay as long as you need, Hildemara.” The sleeping porch was hardly a place to call home, but Hildie felt comfortable there. She would have to ask around and see if anyone needed a roommate.

Jones put her right to work. “We’ve been shorthanded, and it’ll get worse if we go to war. We can’t ignore Hitler forever, and the Army will need nurses.”

Hildie dove into work. She felt useful again. Mama may not need her, but plenty of others did. And she loved her work; she loved her patients; she took extra shifts and worked six days a week.

Boots called from Los Angeles. “What are you doing in Farrelly Hall? I thought you’d be married to Trip by now.”

“I haven’t seen Trip.”

“Are you hiding out on ward duty?”

“It’s been a long time, Boots. I doubt he remembers me.”

“You’re such an idiot.”

Standing at the nurses’ station a couple mornings later, Hildemara heard a thump as someone hit the double doors and swung them open. Her heart jumped when she saw Trip striding down the corridor. He looked mad. She hadn’t even caught a glimpse of him since returning to Merritt two weeks before. She had avoided the cafeteria for fear of running into him. “Hello, Trip. How are you?”

He caught her by the wrist and kept walking. “Excuse us, ladies.” He half dragged her down the hall, opened a linen closet, and pulled her inside.

“Trip, I . . .”

He kicked the door shut behind him, hugged her to him, and then kissed her. Her nursing cap came askew, dangling by a bobby pin. When he lifted his head, she tried to say something, and he kissed her again, deeper this time. He held her so close she didn’t have to wonder what he was feeling. Her toes curled in her white oxfords. They bumped against a shelf. He drew back. “Sorry.”

Breathless, he looked down at her. He was about to kiss her again when someone tapped on the door. "Careful of the linen in there!" Jones's rubber soles squeaked down the hall.

"Marry me."

"Okay."

His breath came out sharply. "Okay?"

"Yes." She stepped forward and dug her hands into his hair. "Yes. Please." She pulled his head down. "Don't stop."

He caught her wrists and pulled her hands down. "I hoped to get this welcome in Murietta." His mouth tipped in a lopsided grin. "You gave me the impression you weren't coming back at all." His eyes darkened. "Boots called."

"I'll have to thank her."

"Mama doesn't need you anymore?" He taunted her gently, putting her cap back on her head, trying to make repairs. Her heart hammered.

"Mama kicked me out."

"God bless Mama." He cupped her cheek tenderly, then ran his thumb lightly over her swollen lips. "I'm going to write her a thank-you letter." He kissed her again, as though he couldn't help himself.

No tap this time, but a firm rap of hard knuckles. "That's enough, Mr. Arundel. We have work to do around here."

Trip opened the door. "Yes, ma'am."

"Get that cheeky grin off your face and get off my ward." She looked Hildemara over. "Fix your hair. What? No ring?" She called after Trip. "You do have honorable intentions, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Laughing, he hit the door again and disappeared.

Hildie laughed, too, exultant.

* * *

Trip wanted to buy a diamond solitaire, but Hildie talked him out of it. "I can't wear it to work. Fancy rings carry bacteria, and a solitaire would catch on linens when I change beds." He picked a platinum wedding band lined with tiny diamonds instead. They would have a small church wedding in Oakland right after school let out in June.

Trip took another part-time job washing windows to save money for a house. Hildemara took extra shifts. They hardly saw one another, except when they went to church together every Sunday.

As the weeks passed, Hildie began to feel lethargic. She had chills during the day and bundled into a sweater. She had night sweats. Trip

put his hand against her forehead one evening. “You’re hot.”

“I’m probably getting a cold or something.”

Trip took her back to the apartment she shared with a pulmonary ward nurse. He insisted she stop working so hard and take at least two days off a week. She cut back on her hours, but still didn’t seem to feel rested. When Trip took her bowling, Hildie could hardly lift the ball and roll it down the alley. Twice, she dumped it and watched it roll slow motion down the gutter. “Sorry. I’m just too tired tonight.”

“Taking care of your father took a lot out of you, Hildie.” Trip wove his fingers with hers. “You’ve lost more weight since you got back.”

She knew and had been trying to eat more. Her chest ached. She couldn’t seem to get a full breath. Depressed, she took a few days off. Trip came by and opened cans of chicken soup. “No more extra shifts, Hildie. Promise me. You look exhausted.”

“Stop worrying, Trip.”

Jones scowled when she came on ward after a few days’ rest. “Go downstairs right now and see the staff physician.” She picked up the telephone. “Go on, Hildemara. I’m calling him right now and telling him you’re on the way.”

The doctor put his stethoscope against her chest. He reviewed her symptoms. She found it difficult to fill her lungs with air. It hurt to breathe. He thumped her chest and listened again, looking grim. “Pleural effusion.” Fluid on the lungs.

“Pneumonia?”

He wouldn’t answer, and Hildemara felt cold shock race through her body. When he checked her into the hospital and ordered X-rays, she didn’t protest. She couldn’t get Mr. Douglas off her mind, and there had been two other patients she had tended since then who had been transferred out of the medical ward into quarantine.

Trip came in before she could leave orders that she didn’t want visitors. She hadn’t stopped crying since being checked into the hospital. When she saw him, she put out her hand. “Stay away from me.”

“What?”

“Get out of here, Trip.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

She held a sheet up over her mouth. “I think I have tuberculosis.”

He went white. Both of them knew a student nurse had died the year before. Two other bronchitis patients turned out to have active

TB.

Trip kept coming. She grabbed the cord and pressed the button over and over. A nurse came running.

“Get him out of here. Now!”

“Hildie!”

Sobbing, pulling the sheet over her head, she turned away.

The nurse escorted Trip from the room, then came back. “Shouldn’t you wait until the test results come back before—?”

“And risk exposing someone? You should wear a mask! And keep people out of here!”

She didn’t have to ask the doctor what the X-rays showed. She could see it plainly on his face.

“We need to send fluid to the lab before we can be sure.”

Small comfort. He aspirated fluid from her infected lung and sent it to the lab, where it would be injected into a rat. The doctor ordered her to the contagion unit.

Trip came immediately. She refused to see him. He wrote a note and gave it to a nurse.

*We’ve kissed a hundred times, Hildie. I’ve already been exposed! Let me come in and see you. Let me sit with you. Let me hold your hand. . . .*

Crying, she insisted on plastic gloves and a mask before she wrote back to him.

*I didn’t know I had TB! You cannot come in. Don’t ask me again. This is hard enough as it is. I love you. Go away!*

She didn’t want to take any chances on infecting him or anyone else.

Hildie spent the next few weeks on the isolation ward, waiting for test results. Trip kept coming back. “You’re the most stubborn, willful woman I’ve ever met,” he called through the door.

The tests came back positive.

## Hoofstuk 35

## 1941

Pappa is nog nie eens ’n week in sy graf nie toe Mamma begin werk. Sy staan ligdag op en maak koffie. Dan gaan sy uit om die koei te melk, die hoenders te voer en eiers te gaan haal. Cloe gaan terug Hollywood toe. Rikka gaan terug kollege toe. Bernie behartig die werk op die plaas. Elizabeth versorg die saailinge in die kwekery en bekamp die onkruid en goggas in die groentetuin.

Die mense kom steeds kuier, en almal bring iets: kasserolle; koeke; Duitse aartappelslaai; klein flessies tuisgemaakte konfyte en jellies; gepekelde waatlemoenskil; groot flesse appelkose, perskes en kersies. Deur die jare het Mamma altyd geskenke vir behoeftige gesinne geneem, en nou oes sy wat sy in haar goedhartigheid gesaai het.

Gefrustreerd van niksdoen, begin Hildemara die huis takel. Sy skrop die kombuisvloer, haal alles uit die kaste en skrop die rakke, skuur die stoof en wasbak. Sy skuur die muur waar die verf afdop en besluit dat dit tyd is om alles ’n bietjie te verfris. Sy gebruik ’n deel van haar spaargeld om vrolike geel verf te koop, dieselfde kleur wat Mamma oorspronklik gekies het en wat deur die jare verbleik het.

Elizabeth het die fraaiste gordyne vir die kothuis gemaak. Waarom nie vir Mamma nie? Hildemara koop materiaal en vra Elizabeth om nuwe gordyne vir die woonkamer, kombuis en slaapkamers te maak. Sy rond dit af met deursigtige gordyne sodat Mamma die vensters kan oopmaak sonder dat daar stof inwaai of die son die rusbank verbleik wat sy en Elizabeth nuut oorgetrek het. Sy maak mooi dekoratiewe blou en geel kussings en werk kant om die rante. Mamma het nog nooit so iets gehad nie.

Mamma maak steeds kos. Hildemara bestel ’n kanttafeldoek. Elke paar dae sorg sy dat daar ’n nuwe rangskikking op die tafel is.

As Mamma enige van hierdie veranderings opmerk, sê sy dit nie. Hildemara weet nie of dit Mamma se smart verlig of nie.

Sy gaan haal die boks oorskietmateriaal en begin aan ’n vloerkleedjie werk. Die bont kleure sal die woonkamer ophelder. Toe sy vir Cloe skryf en vir haar sê wat sy beplan, stuur Cloe ’n pakkie met stukkies materiaal. Die werk maak Hildemara se ledige aande vol. Sy moet werk, anders kan sy nie aan die slaap raak nie. Sy treur oor Pappa en bekommer haar oor Mamma.

En sy kan Trip nie uit haar gedagtes kry nie.

Selfs wanneer sy doodmoeg op haar bed neerval, ontwyk die slaap haar. Sy lê wakker en wonder wat hy doen, of hy iemand ontmoet het. Natuurlik het hy. Sy kan nie teruggaan nie. Sy kan Mamma nie op haar eie los nie.

Een aand sit Mamma haar boek neer en skud haar kop. “Dit gaan jou maande neem om daai mat klaar te maak, Hildemara. Hoekom het jy daarmee begin?”

“Want dit sal die woonkamer ophelder. Kyk na al die kleure, Mamma. As ons fliek toe gaan, sal ons party van hierdie materiale in kostuums sien. Rikka gaan ’n skildery van die Alpe maak. Ons sal dit hier teen die muur hang. Dit sal – ”

“Dit is my huis, Hildemara. Nie joune nie.”

Hildie trek haar asem skerp in toe sy haar vinger met die naald raak steek. Sy suig aan die wond. “Ek weet, Mamma. Ek probeer alles net ’n bietjie opkikker, dit – ”

“Ek hou van die geel mure. Ek hou van die nuwe gordyne. Maar genoeg is genoeg.”

“Wil Mamma nie die mat hê nie?” Hildie voel magteloos teen die pyn wat in haar uitkring. “Wat is ek veronderstel om hiermee te doen?”

“Los dit net in die boks.”

“Die mat is – ”

“Groot genoeg vir voor die wasbak.”

Hildemara se oë skiet vol trane. “Wat probeer Mamma sê?” Sy weet, maar sy wil dit hoor. Sy wil hê dit moet uitgespel word.

“Ek het nie ’n bediende nodig nie, Hildemara. Ek het beslis nie ’n verpleegster nodig nie!”

Haar woorde sny diep. “Mamma het my nie nodig nie. Is dit wat Ma probeer sê?”

Die emosie rimpel oor Mamma se gelaat, soos ’n storm oor water, en dan verhard haar gesig. “Nou goed, Hildemara Rose. As dit is wat dit vra, sal ek dit sê. Ek het jou nie nodig nie. Ek wil jou nie hier hê nie. Hoe gouer jy weggaan, hoe beter vir albei van ons!”

*Weggaan? Waarnatoe?* Hildemara se gesig vertrek. "Dit was Mamma wat my gevra het om huis toe te kom!"

"Om Pappa te verpleeg! En jy het, en nou is hy nie meer hier nie. Ek kan na myself omsien!"

"Ek wou net help."

"Nee. Jy wou die martelaar speel."

"Dis nie waar nie!"

"Wat dan anders? Hoekom sou jy twee maande bly en alles doen wat jy altyd gehaat het?"

"Ek wou nie hê Mamma moes alleen wees nie!" Sy bars uit in trane.

"Toe ek laas gekyk het, het Bernie en Elizabeth 'n paar honderd meter van my agterdeur af gebly." Mamma se hande sluit om die stoel se armleunings. "Jy het verpleging studeer. Jy het vir my gesê dis wat jy met jou lewe wou doen! Wat maak jy dan nog hier? Hoekom het jy nie weer gaan verpleeg nie? Jy het jou eie lewe gehad voordat ek jou gevra het om te help. Jou hulp is nie meer nodig nie. Hoekom is jy nog hier?" Sy staan op en haar gesig vertrek. "*Gaan aan met jou lewe en los my in vrede!*" Sy gaan na die kamer wat sy en Pappa gedeel het en slaan die deur toe.

Nadat sy die vloerkleedjie in die boks met oorskiet gestop het, hardloop sy na Bernie se ou slaapkamer toe. Sy slaan haar hande oor haar gesig en snik. *Teruggaan? Na wat toe?* Sy het haar verhouding met Trip beëindig. As daar ooit 'n kans op geluk was, het sy dit op die dag van die roudiens weggegooi. As sy na Merritt toe teruggaan, sal sy dalk iewers in hom vasloop. Een of ander meisie sou definitief ja gesê het. Hoe gaan sy dit verduur om hom saam met iemand anders te sien? En nou het Mamma haar ware gevoelens laat blyk. Mamma kan nie wag om van haar ontslae te raak nie.

Wat het sy verwag?

Sy pak haar tasse, stort en gaan praat met Bernie en Elizabeth. "Ek het môre 'n geleentheid nodig."

"Waarnatoe gaan jy?"

"Terug Oakland toe."

Daardie nag kan sy nie slaap nie. Sy gaan maak koffie.

Mamma kom uit. "Jy is vroeg op."

"Ek is op pad."

"Wil jy iets eet voordat jy gaan?"

As Hildie gehoop het dat Mamma van plan sou verander, het sy haar antwoord. "Nee, dankie."

Mamma skink vir haarself 'n koppie koffie. "Ek sal aantrek en jou na

die busstasie toe neem."

"Bernie vat my."

"O." Sy gaan sit en laat haar asem uit. "Nou ja, nes jy wil."

Toe dit tyd is om te ry, gaan staan Hildemara in die agterdeur. "Totsiens, Mamma."

"Skryf."

Wanneer Bernie by die pad indraai wat voor die huis verbyloop, sien sy Mamma op die stoep staan. Sy lig haar hand. Die klein gebaar bied nie veel troos nie.

"Jammer, Hildie."

Bernie bestuur soos Mamma – vinnig, selfversekerd, regop en met sy oë reguit voor hom. "Gaan jy regkom?"

"Daar behoort nie probleme te wees nie." Juffrou Jones het gesê dat sy haar pos vir haar sal hou. Wat die res betref, sy sal moet wag en sien hoeveel swaarkry sy kan verduur voordat sy vlug.

***

Noudat Boots weg is, het Hildie nie 'n heenkome nie. Mevrou Kaufman sê dat sy in Farrelly Hall kan kom bly. "Bly so lank as wat jy nodig het, Hildemara." Die slaapstoep kan nie regtig 'n tuiste genoem word nie, maar Hildie voel gemaklik daar. Sy sal moet rondvra en hoor of iemand 'n kamermaat nodig het.

Jones span haar dadelik in. "Ons het te min hande, en dit sal erger raak as ons oorlog verklaar. Ons kan Hitler nie vir altyd ignoreer nie, en die weermag gaan verpleegsters nodig hê."

Hildie verdiep haar in haar werk. Sy voel weer nuttig. Mamma het haar dalk nie nodig nie, maar baie ander wel. En sy is lief vir haar werk; sy is lief vir haar pasiënte; sy sit ekstra skofte in en werk ses dae 'n week.

Boots bel haar uit Los Angeles. "Wat maak jy in Farrelly Hall? Ek't gedink dat jy en Trip teen hierdie tyd al getroud is."

"Ek het Trip nog nie gesien nie."

"Is dit omdat jy tussen die pasiënte wegkruip?"

"Baie water het in die see geloop, Boots. Ek twyfel of hy my nog sal onthou."

"Jy kan so deksels dom wees."

Toe sy 'n paar oggende later by die diensstasie staan, hoor Hildemara 'n dowwe slag toe iemand die dubbeldeure tref en hulle

oopswaai. Haar hart mis ’n slag toe sy Trip in die gang sien aankom. Hy lyk kwaad. Sy het hom nog nie met ’n oog gesien sedert sy ’n paar weke gelede in Merritt aangekom het nie. Sy het die kafeteria vermy uit vrees dat sy in hom sou vasloop. “Hallo, Trip. Hoe gaan dit?”

Hy kry haar aan die gewrig beet en hou aan met loop. “Verskoon ons, dames.” Hy sleep haar so te sê saam met hom, maak ’n linnekas oop en trek haar binnetoe.

“Trip, ek ... ”

Hy skop die deur agter hom toe, trek haar teen hom vas en soen haar. Haar kappie hang later aan ’n haarknippie. Toe hy sy kop oplig, probeer sy iets sê, maar hy soen haar weer, dieper hierdie keer. Hy hou haar so styf teen hom vas dat sy nie hoef te wonder wat hy voel nie. Hulle stamp teen ’n rak. Hy staan terug. “Jammer.” Hy kyk uitasem na haar. Hy is op die punt om haar weer te soen toe iemand aan die deur tik. “Versigtig met die linne daarbinne!” Jones se rubbersole knars in die gang af.

“Trou met my.”

“Goed.”

Sy asem kom vinnig uit. “Goed?”

“Ja.” Sy tree vorentoe en strengel haar vingers deur sy hare. “Ja. Asseblief.” Sy trek sy kop nader. “Moenie ophou nie.”

Sy hande sluit om haar gewrigte en hy trek haar hande af. “Ek het gehoop om hierdie verwelkoming in Murietta te kry.” Sy mond lig in ’n skewe glimlag. “Jy het my die indruk gegee dat jy glad nie terugkom nie.” Sy oë verdonker. “Boots het gebel.”

“Ek sal vir haar moet dankie sê.”

“Het Mamma jou nie meer nodig nie?” Hy terg haar sag. Haar hart klop wild terwyl hy haar kappie op haar kop sit en onhandig probeer vassteek.

“Mamma het my uitgeskop.”

“Seën vir Mamma.” Hy kelk haar wang sag in sy hand en streel liggies oor haar geswolle lippe. “Ek gaan vir haar ’n dankie-sê-brief skryf.” Hy soen haar weer, amper asof hy homself nie kan help nie.

Hierdie keer is dit nie ’n tikkie nie, maar ’n besliste klop van harde kneukels. “Dis genoeg, meneer Arundel. Hier is werk wat gedoen moet word.”

Trip maak die deur oop. “Ja, Suster.”

“Vee daardie astrante glimlag van jou gesig af en maak jou uit die voete.” Sy kyk Hildemara op en af. “Gaan doen iets aan jou hare. Wat? Geen ring nie?” Sy roep agter Trip aan. “Ek hoop jy het eerbare

intensies, jong man!"

"Ja, Suster!" Hy lag toe hy die deure oopgooi en verdwyn.

Hildie lag uitgelate.

***

Trip wil 'n solitêr-verloofring koop, maar Hildie laat hom daarvan afsien. "Ek kan dit nie werk toe dra nie. Deftige ringe is vol bakterieë en 'n solitêr gaan aan die lakens haak wanneer ek beddens opmaak." Hy besluit uiteindelik op 'n platinum troupand met klein diamantjies. Sodra die universiteit in Junie sluit, wil hulle 'n klein kerktroue in Oakland hê.

Trip begin deeltyds vensters was om vir 'n huis te spaar. Hildemara werk ekstra skofte. Hulle sien mekaar skaars, behalwe wanneer hulle elke Sondag saam kerk toe gaan.

Hildemara sukkel met moegheid. Bedags kry sy so koud dat sy 'n trui moet aantrek, en snags het sy nagsweet. Een aand sit Trip sy hand op haar voorkop. "Jy's warm."

"Ek is seker besig om verkoue te kry of iets."

Trip neem haar terug na die woonstel wat sy met 'n verpleegster deel. Hy dring daarop aan dat sy nie so hard moet werk nie en ten minste twee dae 'n week moet afvat. Sy sny aan haar ure, maar dis asof sy steeds nie uitgerus voel nie. Toe Trip haar een aand kegelbaan toe neem, het sy skaars genoeg krag om die bal op te tel en te rol. Sy laat val dit twee maal en kyk hoe dit in stadige aksie in die sloot afrol. "Jammer. Ek's net te moeg vanaand."

"Jou pa se kanker het baie uit jou gevat, Hildie." Trip vleg sy vingers deur hare. "Vandat jy teruggekom het, het jy nog gewig verloor."

Sy het dit self agtergekom en het probeer om meer te eet. Haar bors pyn. Dis asof sy nie kan diep asemhaal nie. Dis met 'n gevoel van neerslagtigheid dat sy 'n paar dae verlof neem. Trip bring blikkies hoendersop wanneer hy kom kuier. "Jy gaan nie nog ekstra skofte werk nie, Hildie. Belowe my. Jy lyk doodmoeg."

"Hou op om jou te bekommer, Trip."

Jones frons toe sy na 'n paar dae terugkom werk toe. "Gaan onmiddellik ondertoe en laat die personeeldokter na jou kyk." Sy tel die telefoon op. "Toe, toe, Hildemara. Ek bel hom nou dadelik en sê dat jy op pad is."

Die dokter plaas sy stetoskoop teen haar bors en sê dat sy moet asemhaal. Sy sukkel om haar longe vol lug te maak. Dit is seer om asem te haal. Hy klop op haar bors en luister weer met 'n stroef gesig. "Pleurale uitvloeiing." Vog op die longe.

"Longontsteking?"

Hy antwoord nie, en Hildemara word yskoud. Toe hy haar laat opneem en X-strale aanvra, protesteer sy nie. Sy kan meneer Douglas nie uit haar gedagtes kry nie, en sedertdien het sy nog twee ander pasiënte verpleeg wat uit die mediese saal geskuif is en onder kwarantyn geplaas is.

Trip kom voordat sy kon opdrag gee dat sy nie besoekers wil ontvang nie. Sy het nog nie ophou huil vandat sy opgeneem is nie. Toe sy hom sien, hou sy haar hand op. "Moenie nader kom nie."

"Wat?"

"Gaan uit, Trip."

"Wat makeer jou?"

Sy trek 'n laken oor haar mond. "Ek dink ek het tuberkulose.""

Hy verbleek. Hulle albei het 'n leerlingverpleegster geken wat die vorige jaar oorlede is. Twee ander brongitis-pasiënte is later ook met aktiewe TB gediagnoseer.

Trip loop nader. Sy gryp die koord en druk die knoppie oor en oor. 'n Verpleegster kom aangehardloop.

"Kry hom hier uit. Nou!"

"Hildie!"

Sy trek die laken snikkend oor haar kop en draai weg.

Nadat die verpleegster Trip uitgeneem het, kom sy terug. "Moet jy nie wag totdat die uitslae terug is voordat – ?"

"En die gevaar loop om iemand daaraan bloot te stel? Jy moet 'n masker dra! En die mense hier uithou!"

Sy hoef die dokter nie te vra wat hy op die X-strale gesien het nie. Dit staan duidelik oor sy gesig geskryf.

"Ek wil eers vog na die laboratorium stuur voordat ek seker is."

'n Geringe troos. Hy trek vog uit haar geïnfekteerde long en stuur dit laboratorium toe waar 'n rot daarmee ingespuit sal word. Die dokter beveel dat sy na die isolasie-eenheid oorgeplaas moet word.

Trip kom dadelik. Sy weier om hom te sien. Hy skryf 'n briefie en gee dit vir 'n verpleegster.

*Ons het mekaar honderde kere gesoen, Hildie. Ek is alreeds blootgestel! Laat my inkom en jou sien. Laat my by jou sit. Laat my jou hand vashou …*

Sy dring aan op plastiek handskoene en ’n masker voordat sy huilend vir hom terugskryf.

*Ek het nie geweet dat ek TB het nie! Jy kan nie inkom nie. Moet my nie weer vra nie. Dis moeilik genoeg soos dit is. Ek is lief vir jou. Gaan weg!*

Sy wil nie enige kans waag om hom of enigiemand anders aan te steek nie.

Hildie bring die volgende paar weke in die isolasiesaal deur terwyl sy vir die uitslae wag. Trip hou aan terugkom. “Jy is die hardkoppigste, moedswilligste vrou wat ek al ooit ontmoet het,” roep hy deur die deur.

Die toetse kom positief terug.

## Chapter 36

"We don't know enough yet about tuberculosis." The doctor looked apologetic. Several nurses had died over the last few years. Clearly he didn't want to give false hope.

Hildemara knew she had little chance of survival with a history of pneumonia.

"I've ordered bed rest."

She gave a bleak laugh. As if she hadn't been in bed resting for weeks!

"Merritt doesn't have a contagion ward dedicated to TB, so you will be transferred to a sanatorium. There are several from which to choose, but you'll need to make your decision right away or the hospital administration will have to decide for you."

Though Hildie had contracted tuberculosis while working, it still remained unsettled whether Merritt Hospital administration would pay for her care. Not wanting to accumulate debt, she chose the least expensive facility, Arroyo del Valle, a county sanatorium in the Livermore hills. They offered financial aid. If she survived, she would need it. She found herself wondering who would have to pay the bills if she died. Citizens, of course. Taxes. She felt ashamed.

Trip protested. "There's a better hospital right here in the Bay Area." He stood in the hallway, speaking to her through the barely open door.

She didn't want to tell him her reasons. Why waste money if she wasn't going to live anyway? "I'll do better out in the country with space and fresh air around me."

"I'm going to call Rev. Mathias. He can perform the wedding right here in the hospital. Jones would come."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"You know why not. There's no cure, Trip."

"I'm praying for you. I've got the whole church praying for you. My folks are praying. Their church is praying. Your mother, Bernie, Elizabeth . . ."

"Stop it, Trip!" Every breath hurt. Her heart ached even more. She panted for a moment until she had breath to speak. "What if it's not God's will?"

He pushed the door open and came in. "You're giving up. Don't you dare give up!"

A nurse appeared almost immediately. “You can’t be in here!”

“I’ll go for now, Hildie, but I won’t go far.” When the nurse took him by the arm, he jerked free. “Give me a minute!” He set the nurse aside and walked over to the bed, grabbing Hildemara by the wrists as she held the bedcovers over her mouth. “I love you, Hildie. Nothing is ever going to change that. In sickness and in health. I swear to you before God and this witness.” He jerked his head back toward the nurse calling down the hall for security. “As long as we both shall live.” He caressed her wrists before he let go of her. Two men appeared in the corridor. He raised his hands. “I’m going.”

“To the showers first,” one informed him.

Hildemara wondered if TB would be as painful a death as cancer, or if she’d die of a broken heart first.

* * *

Hildemara’s first letter at Arroyo came from Mama. Only one line.

*I’ll come down as soon as the grape harvest is over. You get better.*

Just like Mama to give an order.

Several other nurses had been sent to Arroyo. Everyone got along. Hildie supposed it came from having so much in common with one another. They talked about nursing, families, friends, doctors, cases they had worked. They played games, read books, spent time outside in the sunshine, and slept. To anyone else, it probably would have sounded like a vacation.

The fluid extractions felt like slow torture. She suffered from night sweats and high fevers. After weeks of rest, she still felt weak. Frustration and grief increased her depression as time passed and she felt no improvement.

Trip came to visit. She gave up trying to make him stay away.

Her roommate, Ilea, also a nurse, shared her mother’s delicious homemade fried chicken, potato salad, and chocolate chip cookies with Hildie and anyone else who came to visit. Her fiancé came often. Several patients had husbands; a few had children. One with kids died a week after Hildie came to the hospital. Not all the boyfriends and husbands proved as faithful as Trip. Some never came.

Mama wrote again.

*I’ll come down as soon as the almonds have been sold.*

Hildie wrote back.

*Don’t feel you need to come. It is a long drive, and I’m not much company.*

A week later, Mama showed up without warning.

* * *

Hildemara glanced up in surprise and saw Mama standing a few feet away. “Mama?”

She had that look on her face that meant trouble. “You’re my daughter. Did you think I wouldn’t come?”

Hildie coughed into a handkerchief. Mama sat slowly, watching her, expressionless. When the spasm finally stopped, Hildemara leaned back, feeling drained. “Sorry.” She saw the flash of something in Mama’s eyes. “Sorry I said sorry.” She offered a weak smile.

Mama had brought gifts. Cloe sent a beautiful lace-trimmed nightgown and bathrobe stylish and expensive enough for a Hollywood movie star. She had tucked a note in the folds.

*This was meant for your wedding night. I don’t think Trip will mind if you wear it now.*

Cloe had about as much hope as Hildemara.

Rikka had sent pictures: Cloe at the sewing machine, Mama in the driver’s seat of her Model T, Bernie grafting a tree, Elizabeth in the vegetable garden, Papa standing beneath the blooming almond trees, arms outspread, looking up. She had even drawn one of Hildie sitting in the branches of the chinaberry tree, leaning back against the trunk, wearing a *Mona Lisa* smile. The last was a caricature self-portrait of a girl in an artist’s smock drawing a naked man who looked remarkably like Melvin. Hildie laughed and then coughed again, longer this time.

Mama had crocheted a pink lap blanket. Hildemara smoothed it over her legs. “It’s beautiful. Thank you for coming all this way to see me.”

“You didn’t think I would, did you?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t expect it.”

Mama looked off toward the rolling hills and oak trees. “It’s nice and peaceful here.”

“Yes.” *A good place to die.* Sometimes she prayed God would take her. Trip could move on with his life. She wouldn’t feel like she lived in the bottom of a well. Papa said once that death was opening a door into heaven.

They talked about the ranch. Bernie and Elizabeth still hoped for a baby. Hildemara didn’t want to take that hope away and tell Mama it wasn’t likely to happen.

Mama talked about Papa and how he loved Hildie. They talked

about Cloe and the movie stars she had met. Cloe liked to drop names like Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, Bette Davis, Tyrone Power, Alice Faye. She had finally snagged her dream job and made costumes for the movies. She met many stars at pre- and postproduction parties.

Other patients came outside, greeted Hildemara, met Mama, talked awhile, and moved off to rest in the sunshine. "You've made some nice friends, Hildemara."

"We try to hold one another up."

"And Trip?"

"He comes once a week, when he's not in class or on duty. He still needs a few hours before he can graduate from Cal. Some of his units didn't transfer from Colorado. As soon as he finishes school, he's taking on more hours at the hospital. He can't afford medical school yet."

Mama relaxed in her chair, mouth softening. She smoothed the wrinkles from her cotton flower-print dress and folded her hands. "Good. All you have to do now is get well."

"That's not up to me."

Her eyes flared. "Yes. It is."

Hildemara didn't try to argue. She knew more about tuberculosis than Mama could ever guess. Why tell her what it did to a person's lungs? It was enough that Hildie didn't have hope. Why strip Mama of hers?

Troubled, Mama pushed herself up. "Well, as much as I hate to say it, I'd better get going. It's a long drive back to Murietta." Hildemara drew the lap blanket aside and started to stand. "No, Hildemara Rose. You sit right there and enjoy the sunshine." Stepping back, Mama looped her knitted sweater over her arm and picked up her worn white purse. "Before I go, I've got something to say to you." She leaned down and grasped Hildemara's chin. "Find the guts to fight, and hang on tight to life!"

Hildemara jerked her chin away and glared at her through tears. "I'm doing my best."

Mama straightened, her expression disdainful, mocking. "Really? Not from what I can see. You've been sitting here for the past two hours feeling sorry for yourself."

"I never said—"

"You didn't have to say anything. I can see it written all over your face. You've given up!" She shook her head. "I never thought any of my children would turn out to be cowards, but here you are giving

in. Just like—" She pressed her lips together. "Why waste my breath?"

Hurt, furious, Hildemara pushed herself out of the chair. "Thanks so much for your compassion, Mama. Now, get out of here." Heart pounding, she watched her mother walk away. Mama looked back once, a smirk on her face.

Blood coursed through Hildie's veins for the first time in weeks. She sat again, shaking, fists in her lap. Bundling up the pink lap robe, she threw it in the dirt.

The doctor checked her that afternoon. "You have some color back, Miss Waltert. I think you're turning a corner."

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*I went to Arroyo del Valle to see Hildemara Rose. She had Mama's pallor and the deep shadows under her eyes. I could see no life in them when I first arrived. It terrified me. She didn't seem to care whether she lives or dies.*

*I wanted to shake her. Instead, I called her a coward. Though it broke my heart, I mocked and belittled her. Thank God she got good and mad. Her eyes spit fire at me and I wanted to laugh with joy. Better she hate me for a while than give up on life and be put in an early grave. She was trying to get up when I walked away. She barely had strength enough for that, but at least there was color in her cheeks. I hope that fire burns brighter each day.*

* * *

Though her condition improved, Hildemara had to fight the constant tug of depression at how many months passed. Several patients died. Hildemara focused on the number who improved or celebrated remission. Trip wrote daily, but letters were a poor substitute for kisses or an embrace.

*As soon as you're out of that prison, we're getting married.*

She started having dreams that made her awaken in a sweat, but not the kind brought on by TB. She didn't argue with him anymore.

At night, while others slept, she knelt on the end of her bed and looked out the window at the moon and stars and talked to God. Or Papa. She spent hours reading the small, black leather-bound Bible Papa had given her when she started nursing school, writing down Scriptures that promised her a future and hope. When the binding began to give way, she asked for adhesive tape.

It took a while, but she got over being angry with Mama. Mama was just Mama. She had to give up hoping she'd have a relationship

with her like Cloe or Rikka. Both her sisters had always had the lion's share of love. But then, they were lionesses like Mama. Nothing would stop them from going after what they wanted.

Hildie wondered if Mama would ever give her credit for making it on her own.

Jones came to see her. "The secret of longevity, my girl, is getting a chronic illness early in life. I survived the Spanish flu. It made me aware of how fragile our lives are. When you get out of here—and you will—you're going to take better care of yourself. When you get out of here, you come on back to Merritt. I want you back on my ward."

Boots wrote often. She had met someone—a patient, this time.

*I gave him a back rub one night. One thing led to another. Let's just say if we'd been caught, I would have lost my job. He says he loves me, Flo. He says he wants to get married. Just thinking about saying "until death" makes me break out in a sweat.*

A few weeks later, she wrote again and said she had broken up with him.

*I've probably made the biggest mistake of my life, but it's too late now. Some people just aren't ready to settle down. I think I'm one of them.*

Boots took a job in Honolulu.

*Surf and sand and plenty of tanned bodies. Oh, my. I think I'm in heaven.*

A few weeks later, another letter arrived.

*What was I thinking when I took this job? I've seen the entire island twice over. A pity I'm not an Army nurse. There are plenty of cute soldiers around. But I can't stand it. I feel like I'm living on the head of a pin in the middle of the Pacific. Hey. Why would I feel that way? I am! I'm sending résumés to the mainland. Who would've guessed I'd become claustrophobic in paradise?*

* * *

Six months had passed by the time Hildemara received permission to leave. She packed her bags.

"December 1, 1941, is a day of celebration from here forward." Trip carried her suitcase out to the car. He settled her comfortably in the front seat. When he started to tuck the lap robe around her, she protested. "I'm well. Remember?" He grinned and gave her a firm kiss, the first in eight months.

When he slipped behind the driver's seat, he leaned over and put his arm around her. "Let's try that again." He took her hand and

placed it, palm flat, against his chest. She could feel his heart hammering as fast as her own. Eyes black, he caressed her face. “We’d better start making wedding plans now. No more excuses.”

“I can’t think of a single one.”

Six days later, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

## Hoofstuk 36

“Ons weet nog nie genoeg van tuberkulose af nie.” Die dokter lyk verskonend. ’n Hele paar verpleegsters is in die laaste paar jaar daaraan oorlede. Duidelik wil hy haar nie valse hoop gee nie.

Met haar geskiedenis van longontsteking weet Hildemara dat sy nie ’n groot kans op oorlewing het nie.

“Ek kan maar net bedrus vir jou voorskryf.”

Sy lag flou. Asof sy nie nou al weke lank in die bed was nie!

“Merritt het nie ’n isolasie-eenheid vir TB-pasiënte nie, dus sal jy na ’n sanatorium oorgeplaas word. Daar is verskeie waaruit jy kan kies, maar jy sal dadelik jou keuse moet maak, anders sal die hospitaal vir jou moet besluit.”

Alhoewel Hildie die siekte waarskynlik in die hospitaal opgedoen het, is daar nog nie besluit of die Merritt-hospitaal vir haar behandeling sal betaal nie. Omdat sy nie wil skuld maak nie, kies sy die goedkoopste fasiliteit, Arroyo Del Valle, ’n staatsinrigting in die Livermore-heuwels. Hulle bied finansiële bystand. As sy oorleef, gaan sy dit nodig hê. Sy betrap haarself dat sy wonder wie gaan betaal as sy doodgaan. Die belastingbetalers, vanselfsprekend. Sy voel skaam.

Trip protesteer. “Daar is ’n beter hospitaal net hier in die Baai-area.” Hy staan in die gang voor die deur wat op ’n skrefie oop is.

Sy wil hom nie van haar redes vertel nie. Hoekom die geld mors as sy in elk geval nie gaan lewe nie? “Die spasie en die vars lug sal my goed doen.”

“Ek gaan dominee Mathias bel. Hy kan die troue hier in die hospitaal waarneem. Jones sal kom.”

“Nee!”

“Hoekom nie?”

“Jy weet hoekom nie. Daar is nie ’n kuur nie, Trip.”

“Ek bid vir jou. Die hele kerk bid vir jou. My ouers bid. Hulle kerk bid. Jou ma, Bernie, Elizabeth ... ”

“Hou op, Trip!” Elke asemteug maak seer. Maar die seer in haar hart is groter. Sy hyg totdat sy genoeg asem het om te praat. “Sê nou

dis nie die Here se wil nie?"

Hy stoot die deur oop en kom in. "Jy is besig om op te gee. Jy mag nie opgee nie!"

'n Verpleegster maak amper dadelik haar verskyning. "Jy mag nie hier wees nie!"

"Ek sal loop, Hildie, maar ek gaan weer terugkom." Toe die verpleegster hom aan die arm neem, ruk hy los. "Gee my 'n oomblik!" Hy druk verby die verpleegster en toe hy by die bed kom waar Hildemara die laken oor haar mond hou, sluit hy sy hande om haar gewrigte. "Ek is lief vir jou, Hildie. Niks kan dit verander nie. Nie siekte of dood nie. Ek sweer dit voor die Here en hierdie getuie." Hy beduie met sy kop na die verpleegster wat reeds 'n sekuriteitsbeampte gaan roep het. "Solank ons albei lewe." Hy streel oor haar gewrigte voordat hy haar los. Twee mans verskyn in die deur. Hy lig sy hande. "Ek loop."

"Nadat jy gestort het," lig die een hom in.

Hildemara wonder of TB so 'n pynlike dood soos kanker gaan wees, en of sy voor die tyd aan 'n gebroke hart gaan sterf.

***

Hildemara se eerste brief by Arroyo kom van Mamma af. Net een reël.

*Ek kom sodra die druiwe-oes agter die rug is. Word beter.*

Dis so tipies Mamma om 'n opdrag te gee.

'n Paar ander verpleegsters is na Arroyo toe gestuur. Almal kom oor die weg. Hildie veronderstel dis omdat hulle so baie met mekaar in gemeen het. Hulle praat oor verpleging, gesinne, vriende, dokters, die gevalle wat hulle hanteer het. Hulle speel speletjies, lees boek, bring baie tyd buite in die son deur en slaap. Amper asof hulle met vakansie is.

Die vog-ekstraksie voel soos 'n stadige marteling. Sy ly aan nagsweet en hoë koors. Ná weke se rus voel sy steeds swak. Namate die weke verbygaan en sy geen verbetering sien nie, maak die frustrasie en ongelukkigheid haar depressie net erger.

Trip kom kuier. Sy probeer hom nie meer weghou nie.

Haar kamermaat, Ilea, ook 'n verpleegster, deel haar ma se heerlike braaihoender, aartappelslaai en sjokoladekoekies met Hildie en enigiemand wat kom kuier. Haar verloofde kom dikwels. 'n Hele paar pasiënte het mans; 'n paar het kinders. Een vrou met kinders het 'n

week na Hildie se koms gesterf. Nie al die kêrels en mans kom so getrou soos Trip kuier nie. Party kom nooit.

Mamma skryf weer.

*Ek kom sodra die amandels verkoop is.*

Hildie skryf terug.

*Moenie verplig voel nie. Ek's nie juis goeie geselskap nie.*

'n Week later kom Mamma sonder waarskuwing.

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Hildemara kyk verbaas op en sien Mamma 'n paar meter van haar af staan. "Mamma?"

Sy het 'n uitdrukking wat moeilikheid spel. "Jy is my dogter. Het jy gedink ek gaan nie kom nie?"

Hildie hoes in 'n sakdoek. Mamma gaan sit stadig en kyk emosieloos na haar. Toe die bui uiteindelik verby is, sak Hildemara uitgeput agteroor. "Jammer." Iets flits in haar ma se oë. "Jammer ek het jammer gesê." Sy glimlag flou.

Mamma het geskenke gebring. Cloe stuur 'n pragtige nagrok en kamerjas met kantafwerking. Dis stylvol en waarskynlik duur genoeg vir 'n Hollywood-filmster. Sy het 'n briefie daarmee saam opgevou.

*Dit was bedoel vir jou huweliksnag. Ek dink nie Trip sal omgee as jy dit nou dra nie*.

Cloe het omtrent net soveel hoop soos Hildemara.

Rikka stuur sketse: Cloe by die naaimasjien, Mamma agter die stuur in haar Model T, Bernie besig om 'n boom te ent, Elizabeth in die groentetuin, Pappa met uitgestrekte arms en opgehefte gesig onder die bloeiende amandelbome. Daar is selfs een van Hildemara tussen die takke van die seringboom, haar rug teen die stam en 'n *Mona Lisa*-glimlag op haar gesig. Die laaste is 'n karikatuuragtige selfportret van 'n meisie in 'n skilderjas besig om 'n naakte man te teken wat merkwaardig baie na Melvin trek. Hildie lag en toe hoes sy weer, langer hierdie keer.

Mamma het 'n pienk kniekombers vir haar gehekel. Hildemara sprei dit oor haar bene. "Dis pragtig. Dankie dat Mamma so ver gery het om my te sien."

"Jy het nie gedink ek sou nie, nè?"

Sy haal haar skouers op. "Ek het dit nie verwag nie."

Mamma kyk na die golwende heuwels en eikebome. “Dis mooi en rustig hier.”

“Ja.” *’n Goeie plek om dood te gaan*. Somtyds bid sy dat die Here haar kom haal. Dan kan Trip aangaan met sy lewe. Dit sal nie voel asof sy op die bodem van ’n put lewe nie. Pappa het eenmaal gesê dat die dood ’n deur na die hemel toe oopmaak.

Hulle praat oor die plaas. Bernie en Elizabeth hoop nog steeds vir ’n baba. Hildemara wil nie hulle hoop wegneem en vir Mamma sê dat dit waarskynlik nie gaan gebeur nie.

Mamma praat oor Pappa en hoe lief hy vir Hildie was. Hulle praat oor Cloe en die filmsterre wat sy ontmoet het. Cloe noem graag name soos Errol Flyn, Olivia de Havilland, Bette Davis, Tyrone Power, Alice Faye. Sy het uiteindelik haar droomwerk losgeslaan en maak kostuums vir flieks. Sy ontmoet baie sterre by partytjies en geselllighede.

Ander pasiënte kom buitentoe, groet vir Hildemara, ontmoet Mamma, gesels ’n bietjie en gaan sit in die sonnetjie ’n entjie van hulle af. “Jy het oulike vriendinne gemaak, Hildemara.”

“Ons probeer mekaar positief hou.”

“En Trip?”

“Hy kom een maal ’n week, wanneer hy nie klas loop of aan diens is nie. Hy kort nog ’n paar uur voordat hy sy diploma ontvang. Sommige van sy vakke kon nie van Colorado oorgedra word nie. Sodra hy klaarmaak, gaan hy ekstra ure by die hospitaal werk. Hy kan nog nie bekostig om medies te gaan studeer nie.”

Mamma ontspan in haar stoel en haar mond versag. Sy vee die kreukels uit haar katoenrok met die blomme en vou haar hande. “Mooi. Al wat jy nou moet doen, is beter word.”

“Ek kan nie daaroor besluit nie.”

Haar oë flikker. “Ja, jy kan.”

Hildemara probeer nie stry nie. Sy weet meer van tuberkulose as wat Mamma ooit kan raai. Hoekom moet sy vir haar sê wat dit aan ’n mens se longe doen? Dit is genoeg dat Hildie nie hoop het nie. Hoekom Mamma van hare ontneem?

Mamma kom ergerlik orent. “Nou ja, ek haat dit om dit te sê, maar ek moet gaan. Dis ’n ver ent terug Murietta toe.” Hildemara haal die skootkombers af en begin opstaan. “Nee, Hildemara Rose. Bly jy hier en geniet die son.” Sy staan terug, hang haar gebreide trui oor haar arm en tel haar verweerde wit handsak op. “Voor ek gaan, is daar iets wat ek vir jou moet sê.” Sy leun af en sluit haar duim en voorvinger

om Hildemara se ken. “Kry iewers die lus om te baklei en aan die lewe vas te klou!”

Hildemara ruk haar ken weg en gluur deur haar trane na haar ma. “Ek doen my bes.”

Mamma staan regop, haar uitdrukking minagtend, spottend. “Regtig? Nie uit wat ek kan sien nie. Jy het jouself die afgelope twee ure hier sit en jammer kry.”

“Ek het nooit gesê – ”

“Jy hoef niks te sê nie. Dit staan oor jou hele gesig geskryf. Jy het opgegee!” Sy skud haar kop. “Ek het nooit gedink dat enige van my kinders ’n lafaard sou wees nie, maar lyk my jy is besig om op te gee. Net soos – ” Sy pers haar lippe opmekaar. “Hoekom my asem mors?”

Seergemaak en woedend stoot Hildemara haar op uit die stoel. “Baie dankie vir Mamma se deernis. Loop nou, asseblief.” Haar hart klop swaar toe sy haar ma agternakyk. Mamma kyk een maal om, ’n selfvoldane kyk op haar gesig.

Vir die eerste keer in weke bruis die bloed deur Hildie se are. Sy gaan sit bewend, haar vuiste op haar skoot. Dan bondel sy die pienk kombersie saam en gooi dit op die grond.

Daardie middag gaan sy vir haar doktersondersoek. “Jy het ’n bietjie kleur teruggekry, juffrou Waltert. Ek dink jy’s oor die ergste.”

***

*Liewe Rosie*

*Ek het Hildemara Rose in Arroyo del Valle gaan sien. Sy was net so bleek soos Mamma met dieselfde diep skadu’s onder haar oë. Ek het geen lewe in hulle gesien toe ek daar aangekom het nie. Ek was angsbevange. Dit was asof sy nie omgee of sy lewe of doodgaan nie.*

*Ek wou haar skud. In plaas daarvan het ek haar ’n lafaard genoem. Dit het my hart gebreek, maar ek het haar gespot en verkleineer. Dank die Here dat sy kwaad geword het. Haar oë het vuur gespoeg en ek wou lag van blydskap. Sy moet my eerder vir ’n rukkie haat as wat sy moed opgee en in ’n vroeë graf gelê word. Sy het skaars die krag gehad om op te staan, maar ten minste was daar kleur in haar wange. Ek hoop dat daardie vlam elke dag helderder brand.*

***

Alhoewel haar toestand verbeter, moet Hildemara teen die konstante

depressie baklei wanneer sy dink aan hoeveel maande verloop het. ’n Hele paar pasiënte is intussen oorlede. Hildemara konsentreer op die aantal wat beter geword het. Trip skryf elke dag, maar briewe is ’n power plaasvervanger vir soene of ’n omhelsing.

*Ons trou sodra jy uit daardie tronk is.*

Sy kry drome wat haar natgesweet laat wakker skrik, maar dis nie die nagmerries wat TB veroorsaak nie. Sy stry nie meer met hom nie.

Snags wanneer die ander slaap, kniel sy op die punt van haar bed en kyk deur die venster na die maan en sterre en praat met die Here. Of Pappa. Sy sit ure lank met die klein, swart, leergebinde Bybel wat Pappa vir haar gegee het toe sy Merritt toe is, en maak aantekening van verse wat ’n verwagting en toekoms belowe.

Dit neem ’n tydjie, maar uiteindelik is sy nie meer kwaad vir Mamma nie. Mamma is maar net Mamma. Sy moet eerder ophou hoop dat sy ’n verhouding soos Cloe of Rikka met haar ma sal hê. Albei haar sussies het altyd die leeueaandeel van Mamma se liefde gehad. Maar aan die ander kant, hulle is leeuwyfies soos Mamma. Niks keer hulle as hulle iets wil hê nie.

Hildie wonder of Mamma haar ooit erkenning sal gee vir die feit dat sy dit op haar eie gemaak het.

Jones kom haar sien. “Die geheim van langlewendheid is om ’n chroniese siekte vroeg in ’n mens se lewe te kry, my kind. Ek het die Spaanse griep oorleef. Dit het my laat besef hoe broos die lewe is. Wanneer jy hier uitkom – en jy sal – moet jy beter na jouself kyk. Wanneer jy hier uitkom, kom jy terug Merritt toe. Ek soek jou terug in my saal.”

Boots skryf gereeld. Sy het iemand ontmoet – hierdie keer ’n pasiënt.

*Ek het hom een nag ’n rugmassering gegee. Die een ding het tot die volgende gelei. Kom ons sê maar net ek sou my werk verloor as ons uitgevang is. Hy sê hy is lief vir my, Flo. Hy sê hy wil trou. Net die gedagte aan “tot die dood ons skei” laat my in sweet uitslaan.*

’n Paar weke later skryf sy weer en sê dat sy uitgemaak het.

*Ek het waarskynlik die grootste fout van my lewe gemaak, maar nou is dit te laat. Party mense is net nie gereed om nes te skop nie. Ek dink ek’s een van hulle.*

Boots kry werk in Honolulu.

*Sand en see en heelwat sonbruin lywe. Dit voel of ek in die hemel is.*

’n Paar weke later kom daar nog ’n brief.

*Wat het ek gedink toe ek hier kom werk het? Ek het die hele eiland nou al twee keer gesien. Miskien moes ek eerder ’n weermagverpleegster geword het. Daar is heelwat oulike soldate hier rond. Maar ek kan nie meer nie. Dit voel of ek op ’n kopspeld in die middel van die Stille Oseaan bly. Ag tog. Ek kan nie glo ek voel so nie! Maar dit is die waarheid! Ek het my résumé na die vasteland gestuur. Wie sou kon raai dat die paradys my kloustrofobies sou laat voel?*

***

Dit is ses maande voordat Hildemara ontslaan word en uiteindelik haar sakke kan pak.

“Van nou af is 1 Desember, 1941, ’n dag wat gevier gaan word. “Trip dra haar tas na die kar toe en maak seker dat sy gemaklik sit. Toe hy die skootkombers om haar bene wil vou, protesteer sy. “Ek’s gesond. Onthou?” Hy grinnik en gee haar ’n ferm soen, die eerste in agt maande.

Toe hy agter die stuur inskuif, leun hy oor en sit sy arm om haar. “Kom ons probeer weer.” Hy neem haar hand en hou dit plat teen sy bors. Sy hart klop net so vinnig soos haar eie. Sy oë is donker toe hy haar gesig liefkoos. “Ons beter nou begin trouplanne maak. Ek soek nie nog verskonings nie.”

“Ek kan nie aan ’n enkele een dink nie.”

Ses dae later word Pearl Harbor deur die Japannese gebombardeer.

## Chapter 37

Hildemara married Trip on December 21, 1941. Bernie and Elizabeth came up with Mama. Melvin drove Rikka. They left shortly after the ceremony to take the ferry to San Francisco. Cloe sent her regrets. She had a job with a production company working on another swashbuckler. Tyrone Power, this time. "We're sewing night and day to get the costumes ready for the shoot. . . ." Bad weather and lack of money kept Trip's parents in Colorado.

Many of Hildie and Trip's local church friends attended and gave gifts. The deaconesses put on a wedding reception in the social hall. Everyone talked about the war, and some of the men in the congregation had already signed up for military service. Mama gave the newlyweds a crocheted tablecloth with fifty dollars tucked into the folds. They used it to buy train tickets to Denver.

Trip's mother and father made Hildemara feel more like a long-lost daughter than an in-law. When asked what she wanted to call them, she rejected Otis and Marg and opted for what Trip called them —Dad and Mom.

"Look out!" Trip laughed. "Dad's looking for ways to entertain you."

When he hooked a sleigh to the back of his car, Hildie climbed aboard and sailed down East Moreno to Prospect Lake. In a few short weeks, she learned the rudiments of ice-skating and cross-country skiing.

They had little time alone in the small one-bedroom house. Trip's bedroom was much like Hildie's had been, a converted back porch. At least he had snow shutters instead of screen windows. They had no trouble keeping warm.

"We're going to have to go back to California soon, so you can start medical school."

Hildie combed her fingers through Trip's thick brown hair. His parents had gone off to visit friends, leaving them alone for the day. They had spent all morning in bed, not having to worry about making a sound.

Trip took her hand and kissed it. "I joined up, Hildie."

Her heart froze. "What did you say?"

"I went to the recruiter's office on Monday and signed the papers."

She yanked her hand free and sat up. "Oh, Trip. Tell me you

didn't! We've only been married three weeks!" Everything had worked together to keep them apart for so long: Papa's illness, then hers, and now he signed up to go off and fight a war? How could he?

"It's cold." Trip pulled her down again, swinging his leg across hers to hold her there. "Every able-bodied man is joining up. How can I not do my part?"

"So you join up without even saying a word about it? I'm your wife!"

"Hildie . . ."

"Let me up!"

He did. She pulled her robe on and went into the house, standing near the potbelly stove. She'd have to crawl inside to thaw the chill inside her. Trip came in, closing the door behind him. He stood behind her, running his hands up and down her arms. "I should have told you. I'm sorry I didn't. I was afraid I'd let you talk me out of it."

She shook his hands off and faced him, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Is this the way our marriage is going to be? You make life-changing decisions and tell me later?" Something else struck her. "Your parents knew, didn't they? That's why they left us alone today." She closed her eyes. "That's why Mom went to bed early last night and Dad looked so grim."

"Our country needs soldiers. The recruiter thinks I'll end up a medic with my premed background and the time I spent working in a hospital. I can be of service."

He clutched her face, his own agonized. "I can't stay here safe and happy, making love to you every chance I get, while others risk their lives for our freedom. This is a fight for America's survival, Hildie, not a little skirmish in a foreign country somewhere we've never heard of."

She felt her body shaking in reaction. She had read the newspapers, too. If the Japanese invaded California and Germany overran Europe, the whole world would be at war. "You're right. I'll enlist, too. Jones said a year ago the Army would need nurses."

He let go of her, his face flaming. "Over my dead body! You're not enlisting in the Army!"

She laughed in disbelief. "It's all right for you, but not for me. I have more training than you do, Trip. Don't expect me to sit home and wait when my husband could be among the wounded!"

"I want you safe from harm!"

"And I wanted the same for you, but you did as you pleased. And

now I agree. Our country needs us."

"No . . ." He put his head in his hands and turned away.

Hildie put her hand on his back. "If it means our freedom, shouldn't we all be part of it?"

He turned to her, face pale. "Don't do anything yet. Promise me. We'll pray about it."

"Did you?"

*"Yes!"* He cupped her face. "I've been praying since December 7 about what to do."

"And never included me."

Trip winced. "I won't do it again. Listen to me, please. One of us joining right now is enough. Give it a little time and we'll pray and see what God wants for you."

Everything moved faster than either expected.

Trip received his orders, and Hildie followed him to Camp Barkeley, Texas, and then to Fort Riley, Kansas, and then on to Fort Lewis, Washington. She lived in boardinghouses while he lived in the barracks. When he had a day's leave, they stayed in her room, hungry for one another. Tens of thousands of Navy men and Marines headed for the South Pacific to fight the Japanese while the Army geared up to invade Europe. Trip received orders for Officer Candidate School.

"You can't come this time, Hildie. I won't be able to see you, and I don't want you living among strangers. I want you to go home."

Which home? Where? She didn't know whether to go back to work at Merritt, where she would be surrounded by friends, or to Colorado Springs and live with Mom and Dad, or home to Murietta and Mama, if Mama would allow. No place would feel like home without Trip. She would stay in Tacoma until she could figure out what to do.

Trip dressed in his uniform while she sat on the end of the bed in the dressing gown Cloe had made. He leaned down and kissed her. "Maybe God will answer my prayers by then." He brushed his fingers against her cheek and went out the door.

She didn't have to ask what he meant, though he had never spoken his prayer aloud. He wanted her pregnant. He didn't just want a child; he wanted her ineligible to join the military.

She flung a hand over her eyes and prayed God's protection on her husband. If the slight morning nausea the last few days was any indication, God might have already answered Trip's prayer. They might have something to celebrate rather than spending every

moment worrying about what the future could hold. The future could hold a child! Then again, she might just be feeling sick at the thought of what could happen to Trip.

Hildemara waited another month before making an appointment. The doctor confirmed she was pregnant. Proud to be carrying Trip's child, she sat with her hand resting on her abdomen during the long bus ride back to the apartment.

She would go home to Murietta. She didn't want to add to Trip's worries, and her husband wouldn't want her living alone with a baby on the way. *God has settled it, Trip. You're going to be a daddy. I'm going home to Mama. . . .* Mama's first grandchild! Perhaps Mama would even be happy enough to crow about it.

Rikka had gone home to see Melvin before he headed off to Marine Corps boot camp and then gone back to San Francisco. She had quit full-time classes at the California School of Fine Arts, preferring to pick and choose what she studied. She had found a job as a waitress in a fancy restaurant and loved everything about living in San Francisco. She claimed she loved Melvin, but she had no intention of becoming a farmer's wife in Murietta. It remained to be seen whether romance or a lust for life would win out. With Rikka's eyes fixed on city life, Hildemara assumed there would be plenty of room for her and a new baby.

Only a fool assumes.

# Hoofstuk 37

Op 21 Desember, 1941, trou Hildemara met Trip. Bernie en Elizabeth kom saam met Mamma. Melvin bring vir Rikka. Hulle vertrek kort na die seremonie om die veerboot na San Francisco te haal. Cloe maak verskoning. Sy werk op die oomblik by ’n produksiemaatskappy wat besig is om nog ’n aksie-roman te verfilm. Tyrone Power, hierdie keer. “Ons werk dag en nag om die kostuums betyds klaar te hê ... ” Swak weer en ’n tekort aan geld hou Trip se ouers in Colorado.

Baie van Hildie en Trip se kerkvriende het gekom en geskenke gebring. Die diakonesse hou ’n onthaal in die kerksaal. Almal praat oor die oorlog en sommige van die mans in die gemeente het reeds by die weermag aangesluit. Mamma se geskenk aan die pasgetroudes is ’n gehekelde tafeldoek met vyftig dollar in die voue versteek. Hulle gebruik dit vir treinkaartjies na Denver.

Trip se ma en pa laat Hildemara meer soos ’n lank verlore dogter as ’n skoondogter voel. Toe Otis en Marg vra hoe sy hulle wil aanspreek, besluit sy op wat Trip hulle noem – Pa en Ma.

“Oppas!” Trip lag. “My pa soek maniere om jou te vermaak.”

Toe hy ’n slee agter aan sy motor vashaak, klim Hildie op en seil van East Moreno tot Prospect Lake. Binne ’n paar kort weke het sy die beginsels van ysskaats en land-ski onder die knie.

Hulle het min tyd op hulle eie in die klein eenslaapkamerhuisie. Trip se kamer is baie soos dié waarin Hildie grootgeword het, ’n verboude agterstoep. Gelukkig het hy sneeuluike in plaas van gaasvensters. Hulle het geen moeite om warm te bly nie.

“Ons sal binnekort moet teruggaan Kalifornië toe sodat jy met jou studies kan begin.”

Hildie trek haar vingers deur Trip se dik bruin hare. Sy ouers het by vriende gaan kuier en hulle vir die dag op hulle eie gelos. Hulle het die hele oggend in die bed deurgebring, sonder om bekommerd te wees dat hulle ’n geluid maak.

Trip neem haar hand en soen dit. “Ek het aangesluit, Hildie.”

Sy versteen. “Wat sê jy?”

“Ek het Maandag na die werwingskantoor toe gegaan en die papiere geteken.”

Sy ruk haar hand los en sit regop. “O, Trip. Sê vir my jy het dit nie gedoen nie! Ons is nog net drie weke getroud!” Alles het meegewerk om hulle so lank uitmekaar te hou: Eers Pappa se siekte, toe hare, en nou het hy aangesluit om iewers te gaan oorlog voer? Hoe kon hy dit doen?

“Dis koud.” Trip trek haar weer teen hom vas en swaai sy been oor hare om haar daar te hou. “Al die weerbare mans sluit aan. Hoe kan ek nie my deel doen nie?”

“Ek kan nie glo jy het aangesluit sonder om iets te sê nie! Ek is jou vrou!”

“Hildie ... ”

“Laat my gaan!”

Hy maak so. Sy trek haar kamerjas aan en loop kombuis toe om voor die boepensstoof te gaan staan. Sy sal binne-in moet klim om die koue in haar binneste te verdryf. Trip kom in en trek die deur agter hom toe. Hy kom staan agter haar en vryf oor haar arms. “Ek moes jou gesê het. Ek’s jammer ek het nie. Ek was bang jy sou my daarvan laat afsien.”

Sy skud sy hande af en draai na hom. “Is dit hoe ons huwelik gaan wees?” Die trane stroom oor haar wange. “Jy neem besluite wat ons hele lewe verander en sê my later daarvan?” Iets anders tref haar. “Jou ouers weet, nè? Dis hoekom hulle ons vandag alleen hier gelos het.” Sy sluit haar oë. “Dis waarom Ma gisteraand vroeg gaan slaap het en Pa so ongelukkig gelyk het.”

“Ons land het soldate nodig. Met my agtergrond en die werk wat ek in die hospitaal gedoen het, sê die werwer ek behoort as paramedikus te werk. Hulle kan my gebruik.”

Hy neem haar gesig in sy hande, sy eie uitdrukking gefolterd. “Hoe kan ek hier bly en jou by elke geleentheid in my arms neem terwyl ander mans hulle lewe vir ons vryheid waag? Dit is ’n stryd om Amerika se oorlewing, Hildie, nie ’n skermutseling in ’n vreemde land waarvan ons nog nooit gehoor het nie.”

Sy voel hoe haar liggaam begin bewe. Sy het ook die koerante gelees. As die Japannese Kalifornië binneval en Europa deur Duitsland ingeneem word, gaan die hele wêreld in oorlog gewikkel wees. “Jy is reg. Ek sal ook aansluit. Jones het ’n jaar gelede gesê die weermag gaan verpleegsters nodig hê.”

Hy los haar, sy gesig gloeiend. “Oor my dooie liggaam! Ek gaan nie

toelaat dat jy by die weermag aansluit nie!"

Sy lag in ongeloof. "Dis reg as jy aansluit, maar ek mag nie. Ek het meer opleiding as jy, Trip. Moenie van my verwag om by die huis te sit en wag terwyl my man een van die gewondes kan wees nie!"

"Ek wil nie hê jy moet jouself aan gevaar blootstel nie."

"En ek wil nie hê jý moet nie, maar jy het gedoen wat jy wil. En nou stem ek saam. Ons land het ons nodig."

"Nee ... " Hy laat sak sy kop in sy hande en draai weg.

Hildie vryf oor sy rug. "As dit ons vryheid beteken, moet ons almal daaraan deel hê."

Hy draai na haar, sy gesig bleek. "Moenie nou al iets doen nie. Belowe my. Ons sal daaroor bid."

"Het jy?"

"Já!" Hy kelk sy hand om haar gesig. "Ek bid al sedert 7 Desember oor wat ek moet doen."

"En jy het my nooit ingesluit nie."

Trip gryns. "Ek sal dit nie weer doen nie. Luister asseblief na my. Dis genoeg dat een van ons nou aansluit. Gee net 'n bietjie tyd sodat ons kan bid en kyk wat die Here vir jou wil hê."

Alles gebeur vinniger as wat hulle verwag het.

Trip word opgeroep en Hildie volg hom na Camp Barkeley, Texas, en daarna na Fort Riley, Kansas, en daarvandaan na Fort Lewis, Washington. Sy gaan tuis in losieshuise terwyl hy in die barakke bly. Wanneer hy 'n dag verlof het, bring hulle dit in haar kamer deur, uitgehonger vir mekaar. Tien duisende soldate gaan veg teen die Japannese terwyl die weermag voorbereidings tref om Europa in te val. Trip ontvang opdrag om 'n offisierskursus te gaan doen.

"Hierdie keer kan jy nie saamkom nie, Hildie. Ek sal jou nie kan sien nie, en ek wil nie hê jy moet tussen vreemdes bly nie. Ek wil hê jy moet huis toe gaan."

Watter huis? Waar? Moet sy weer in Merritt gaan werk waar sy tussen haar vriende sal wees? Of in Colorado Springs by Ma en Pa gaan bly? Of moet sy na Murietta en Mamma toe teruggaan, indien Mamma daarvoor te vinde sal wees? Sonder Trip gaan nêrens soos huis voel nie. Sy sal in Tacoma bly totdat sy besluit het wat om te doen.

Trip trek sy uniform aan terwyl sy op die punt van die bed sit in die nagrok wat Cloe vir haar gemaak het. Hy leun af en soen haar. "Dalk het die Here my gebede teen daardie tyd beantwoord." Hy streel oor haar wang en dan gaan hy uit.

Sy hoef nie te vra wat hy bedoel nie, al het hy sy gebed nog nooit teenoor haar verwoord nie. Hy wil hê sy moet swanger wees. Hy wil nie net 'n kind hê nie; hy wil hê sy moet ongeskik vir die weermag verklaar word.

Sy hou haar hand oor haar oë en bid dat die Here haar man sal beskerm. As die effense oggendnaarheid van die afgelope paar dae enige aanduiding is, het die Here dalk reeds Trip se gebed verhoor. Pleks van hulle elke oomblik te bekommer oor wat die toekoms inhou, sal hulle iets hê om te vier. Die toekoms kan 'n kind inhou! Aan die ander kant, dalk voel sy net naar by die gedagte aan wat met Trip kan gebeur.

Hildemara wag nog 'n maand voordat sy 'n afspraak maak. Die dokter bevestig dat sy swanger is. Gedurende die lang busrit terug woonstel toe sit sy met haar hand op haar maag, trots en dankbaar om Trip se kind te dra.

Sy sal na Murietta toe gaan. Sy wil nie tot Trip se bekommernis bydra nie en haar man sal nie wil hê sy moet op haar eie wees met 'n baba op pad nie. *God het dit gedoen, Trip. Jy gaan 'n pappa wees. Ek gaan huis toe na Mamma toe ...* Mamma se eerste kleinkind! Wie weet, dalk sal dit hulle nader bring aan mekaar.

Rikka was huis toe om Melvin te sien voordat hy by die vloot moes gaan aanmeld, en daarna is sy terug San Francisco toe. Sy het haar voltydse klasse gestaak sodat sy eerder hier en daar kan kies wat sy wil studeer. Sy werk as kelnerin in 'n deftige restaurant en is gaande oor die lewe in San Francisco. Sy beweer dat sy Melvin liefhet, maar is glad nie van plan om 'n boervrou in Murietta te wees nie. Tyd sal leer of Melvin of haar lus vir die lewe gaan seëvier. Met Rikka se oë op die stadslewe, veronderstel Hildemara dat daar volop plek vir haar en 'n nuwe baba sal wees.

Mhaar dit is dwaas om te veronderstel.

# Chapter 38

**1942**

Hildie left her trunk and suitcase at the train station and walked home. Thinking to surprise Mama, she knocked at the front door. She didn't know the woman who opened it.

She stood gaping. "Who are you?"

"I'd be asking you the same question."

"I'm Hildemara Arundel."

"I don't know no Arundels."

"Waltert. My mother is Marta Waltert."

"Oh." Her face cleared and she pushed the screen door open. "Come in, please. Your mama don't live here no more. She lives out back in the cottage." She put her hand under Hildie's arm. "Here. You set yourself down. You look a little peaked."

"Who are you?"

"Donna Martin." She patted Hildie's shoulder, poured her a glass of lemonade, and said she'd go get her mother.

A moment later, Mama raced in the back door. "What are you doing here, Hildemara?"

"Trip's gone to OCS. He said I couldn't go with him. I wanted to come home!" She burst into tears.

"Come on." Mama hauled her up, apologized to Donna Martin for the intrusion, and pushed Hildie out the back door, down the steps, and along the path to the cottage. She opened the side door into the kitchen. "It's too bad you didn't think to write first, instead of just showing up on the front doorstep."

"I thought I'd be welcome." Hildemara wiped her face. "I should've known better." She looked around. "You're living here? Where are Bernie and Elizabeth?"

Mama poured another glass of lemonade and plunked it in front of Hildie on the small kitchen table. "You look like you haven't slept in a week."

"Mama!"

Mama sat and folded her hands on the table. "Hitch and Donna Martin are sharecropping the place. They've got four children. I don't need much room, so I gave them the big house. They'll be more comfortable there, room to spread instead of living in a tent-house like we did."

"And Bernie and Elizabeth?"

“The government came and took the Musashis away. Bernie and Elizabeth moved over to their place.”

“Took them away? Where?”

“To an assembly center in Pomona. We’ve heard rumors they’re going to be sent to some internment camp in Wyoming, of all places. We sent blankets and coats a week back. Hope they get them. The government seems to think every Jap is a spy these days. I’m surprised a bus hasn’t come after me and the rest of the Jerries and Wops around here, sending us all to some godforsaken camp in Death Valley.” She raised her hands and shook her head. “People go crazy when a war starts. They let fear run wild. Anyway, Hitch and Donna are good, hardworking people. Papa spoke highly of Hitch. They came out when Oklahoma turned to dust, and they’ve had a hard time ever since they arrived in California. I know how that feels. Hitch knows farming and ranching, so I hired him to run the place. That’s how Papa and I started when we came to California. Sharecroppers. Do you remember those days living by the irrigation ditch and in that tent-house Papa built? I’ll treat the Martins better than we were treated, I can promise you that.”

“So you’re living here.”

“Yes. It suits me. The Martins will have the place looking as neat and tended as Papa did when he was well.”

Hildie bristled. “Bernie did a good job.”

“Yes. Bernie did a good job; I’m not saying he didn’t. He’ll do a good job across the street, too.”

“I could help.”

“Not here, you can’t. What, now that you’ve come home you think I’ll put the Martins out so you can move in and play farmer? No. The cottage has only one bedroom, Hildemara, and I’m not sharing it. I don’t need you down here on the farm.”

Hildemara’s mouth trembled. “Did you ever think I might need you?”

Mama put her hands over Hildie’s and held them tightly. “No, you don’t. You’ve been standing on your own two feet for a while now.” She took her hands away. “Go on back to Merritt, back to work, back to your friends! Time will pass faster that way.”

So much for being welcomed home. “I can’t go back to work.”

“Why not?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Mama sat back in her chair. “Oh. Well, that changes things.” She

smiled, her eyes glowing softly. “You and Elizabeth will have a lot to talk about. Go on over. They’ll be glad to see you. And there’s plenty of room at the Musashis’. He built a dormitory for the girls, remember?”

Mama went with her. “Look what the cat dragged in!”

How like Mama to say it that way.

Bernie strode across the yard, grabbed Hildie, and flung her around, her feet swinging. She laughed for the first time in weeks. “Put me down, Bernie!”

“Careful, Bernhard. Your sister’s expecting a baby.”

Bernie set Hildie down. “Holy cow! How far along?”

“Three months.” She watched Mama head back across the street. Hildie could almost imagine her brushing off her hands, having settled things so quickly.

“Elizabeth’s six months along. She’s still sick as a dog every morning. I thought she wrote to you. Letter probably got lost with all your moving hither and yon, following that man of yours.” He put his arm around her and steered her toward the Musashis’ house. “She’s going to be over the moon when she sees you. She’s been lonely.”

Bernie stopped, looking grim. “I’d better warn you now, in case you might want to change your mind about staying here. We’ve had rocks thrown through the windows. Old Man Hutchinson called me a Jap lover yesterday. I can understand, I guess. His son was killed at Pearl Harbor, but try telling him the Musashis had nothing to do with it. People see Jap spies behind every bush, and a few Germans ones, too. Do you understand what I’m saying, Hildie?”

“Yes.” Fear made fools of some people.

Elizabeth turned from the kitchen sink as Bernie and Hildie came in the door. Hildemara gave her a long, considering look. *Miracles do happen,* she told herself. Hildie hoped this pregnancy was one of them.

“Hildie.” Elizabeth spoke softly. “I’m so glad you’re home.” They embraced.

When Hildie searched Elizabeth’s eyes, her friend blushed and looked away. Hildie wanted to weep.

Bernie took Hildie back to the train station in Mama’s Model T to collect her luggage. He had to muscle the trunk into the backseat. “You have more stuff than the last time you came home!”

“Mrs. Henderson, my landlady, had a sale before I left Tacoma. She’s putting the house up for sale and moving in with her daughter. I helped her bring boxes down from her attic and price everything. You

wouldn't believe how much stuff she'd accumulated over the years. She had things left behind by boarders, and her husband had a store. He sold all kinds of things, including china. Her attic was packed! She gave me twelve different place settings from his store displays: Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, Spode, and Villeroy and Boch. She gave me some linen tablecloths, too. We can use everything if you and Elizabeth would like."

"We'll store your trunk in the barn. Keep all those nice things for when you and Trip set up housekeeping. Elizabeth packed all of the Musashis' dishes and kitchenwares. We're using our own."

Bernie seemed to have less security than she did. "What are you going to do when the Musashis come back?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

With the Martins living in the big house and sharecropping the farm, it seemed Bernie had been done out of a home and a job. "Whose idea was it to move over to the Musashis'?"

"Mama and I both had a brainstorm at the same time. It hit me the day I saw the Musashis walking to town with one suitcase apiece. Didn't seem right."

"Thanks for taking me in, Bernie."

Bernie gave her a droll look. "You think I'd leave my pregnant sister without a roof over her head?"

"Mama would."

He gave her an irritated glance. "What a thing to say."

She felt ashamed and defensive. "I didn't know anything about the Martins. Last I heard, you were running the place."

"Things change." He gave a mirthless laugh. "I cried when I saw the Musashis leave. Mama got mad as all get-out. She said it wasn't right. She wrote letters and called anyone who'd listen. She drove all the way to Sacramento to talk to someone in government. They wanted to know where *she* came from. We decided to keep the Musashi farm running. If the taxes don't get paid, they'll lose the place. Me and Mama and Elizabeth decided this was the best way to handle things right now. The Martins are good people, Hildie. They'll take care of the place like it's their own, and Mama's comfortable in the cottage."

While Bernie carried her trunk into the barn, Hildemara took her suitcase inside the house. Elizabeth had set the table. She glanced over her shoulder at Hildie and turned back to the stove.

"Something smells wonderful."

"Stew." Elizabeth's voice sounded choked.

Elizabeth hardly said anything through dinner. Bernie talked about the work that needed doing. Hildie talked about moving from place to place, following Trip. "No place at the inn for OCS." She shrugged, trying not to think about how many months it might be before she saw Trip again.

"I tried to enlist." Bernie tossed his napkin on the table. "I'm strong as a horse, but they wouldn't take me. I had two strikes against me before I walked in the door. I'm an only son and a farmer. Then again, maybe there's another reason they don't want me. Bernhard Waltert isn't exactly an American name, is it?" He got up. "I've got work to do."

Hildie looked from the closing door to Elizabeth with her hangdog expression. "Are things really that bad?"

"Someone called him a coward the last time he went to town."

Hildie stacked Bernie's dish on top of hers and began to clear the table. "Idiots!"

"I can do the dishes, Hildie."

"I want to do my part while I'm living here. You cooked. I'll do the dishes."

Elizabeth sat with her head down. "You know, don't you?"

Hildie stood at the sink and closed her eyes. She wanted to pretend she didn't understand. Drying her hands, she came back and sat at the table. Elizabeth couldn't look her in the face. "Who's the father?"

Elizabeth's shoulders jerked as though she'd been struck. "I love him, you know."

Hildie's heart sank. She wanted to grab Elizabeth and shake her. "Who?"

Elizabeth looked up, eyes wide, mouth trembling. "Bernie. I love Bernie!" Her voice broke. She covered her face.

"Does he know?"

"How did you?"

Hildie lied. "The look on your face when I came in the door, the way you couldn't look me in the eyes. Does Bernie know?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "He knows something's wrong." She wiped tears away. "He doesn't understand why I cry all the time. The doctor told him it had to do with hormones." She looked up, afraid. "Are you going to tell him?"

"I'm not going to be the one to tell my brother something that

will rip the heart right out of him. It's your secret, Elizabeth, not mine." Still, she had to know. "You didn't say who the father is."

"Eddie Rinckel."

Bernie's best friend? "Oh, Elizabeth." Hildie stood up and moved away from her. "How could you?" She felt sick. She wanted to slap Elizabeth, scream at her.

"Do you hate me?"

Hildie closed her eyes. "Yes. I think I do." Trembling, she went back to the sink to do the dishes. Elizabeth got up quietly and went into the bedroom she shared with Bernie.

Later, lying in bed, listening to the night sounds, Hildemara cried.

Suddenly Bernie threw open her door. "Fire! Come on. I need help!"

Hildie grabbed her robe and ran. Elizabeth worked beside Bernie. The Martins, all six of them, and Mama in her nightgown, came with shovels. It took an hour, but they managed to beat out and smother the blaze that had started in the alfalfa field.

Mama tossed her long braid back over her shoulder and wiped soot on the front of her nightgown. "We need another dog." Dash had died while Hildemara was in nursing school.

Bernie gave a cynical laugh. "Make that two, Mama."

# Hoofstuk 38

## 1942

Hildemara los haar trommel en tas op die treinstasie en loop huis toe. Sy het besluit om Mamma te verras en klop onaangekondig aan die voordeur. Sy ken nie die vrou wat vir haar oopmaak nie.

Haar mond val oop. "Wie is jy?"

"Ek kan jou dieselfde vra."

"Ek's Hildemara Arundel."

"Ek ken niemand met die naam Arundel nie."

"Waltert. My ma is Marta Waltert."

"O." Haar gesig ontspan toe sy die gaasdeur oopstoot. "Kom asseblief in. Jou ma bly nie meer hier nie. Sy bly agter in die kothuis." Sy plaas haar hand onder Hildie se arm. "Hierso. Kom sit. Jy lyk 'n bietjie olik."

"Wie is u?"

"Donna Martin." Sy klop Hildie op die skouer, skink vir haar 'n glas limonade en sê dat sy haar ma sal gaan roep.

'n Oomblik later kom Mamma by die agterdeur ingestorm. "Wat maak jy hier, Hildemara?"

"Trip is weg vir offisiersopleiding. Hy het gesê ek kon nie saam met hom gaan nie. Ek wou huis toe kom!" Sy bars in trane uit.

"Kom." Mamma trek haar op, vra Donna Martin om verskoning vir die ongerief en stoot Hildie by die agterdeur uit, af met die trappies en in die rigting van die kothuis. Sy maak die sydeur na die kombuis oop. "Plaas jy daaraan gedink het om te skryf voordat jy so uit die bloute hier opgedaag het."

"Ek het gedink ek sou welkom wees." Hildemara vee haar gesig af. "Ek moes van beter geweet het." Sy kyk om haar rond. "As Mamma hier bly, waar is Bernie en Elizabeth?"

Mamma skink nog 'n glas limonade en plak dit op die smal kombuistafel voor Hildie neer. "Dit lyk of jy 'n week laas geslaap het."

"Mamma!"

Mamma kom sit en vou haar hande op die tafel. "Hitch en Donna Martin boer op 'n deel van die plaas. Hulle het vier kinders. Ek het nie soveel plek nodig nie, en het vir hulle die groot huis gegee. Hulle sal geriefliker daar wees, nie so beknop soos die tenthuis waarin ons moes bly nie."

"En Bernie en Elizabeth?"

"Die regering het gekom en die Musashi's kom haal. Bernie en Elizabeth het in hulle huis gaan bly."

"Kom haal? Waar is hulle nou?"

"By 'n gemeenskapsentrum in Pomona. Daar is gerugte dat hulle na een of ander interneringskamp in Wyoming gestuur gaan word. Ons het so 'n week gelede komberse en jasse gestuur. Ek hoop dit kom by hulle uit. Die regering dink blykbaar deesdae dat elke Japannees 'n spioen is. Dit verbaas my dat hulle nog nie 'n bus gestuur het om my en al die Duitsers en Italianers by 'n godverlate kamp in Death Valley te gaan aflaai nie." Sy lig haar hande en skud haar kop. "Mense word mal wanneer daar oorlog uitbreek. Hulle laat hulle vrese met hulle weghol. In elk geval, Hitch en Donna is goeie, hardwerkende mense. Pappa was beïndruk met Hitch. Hulle het deurgekom toe die droogte Oklahoma getref het, en hulle het dit nog altyd baie swaar in Kalifornië gehad. Ek weet hoe dit voel. Hitch weet van boer, dus het ek hom aangestel om die plek te bestuur. Dis hoe ek en Pappa begin het toe ons Kalifornië toe gekom het. Deelboere. Onthou jy die tyd toe ons langs die leivoor gebly het, en toe in die tenthuis wat Pappa vir ons gebou het? Ek sal die Martins beter behandel as wat ons behandel is, dit kan ek jou sê."

"So Mamma bly hier."

"Ja. Dit pas my. Die Martins sal die plek so netjies en goedversorgd hou soos toe Pappa gelewe het."

Hildie ruk haar op. "Bernie het 'n goeie werk gedoen."

"Ja. Bernie hét 'n goeie werk gedoen; ek sê nie hy het nie. En hy sal by die Musashi's ook 'n goeie werk doen."

"Ek kan help."

"Nie hier nie. Dink jy noudat jy hier is, sal ek die Martins uitgooi sodat jy kan intrek en boervrou speel? Nee. Die kothuis het net een slaapkamer, Hildemara, en ek gaan dit nie deel nie. Ek het jou nie hier op die plaas nodig nie." Hildemara se mond bewe. "Het Mamma al ooit daaraan gedink dat ek Ma nodig het?"

Mamma plaas haar hande oor Hildie s'n en hou hulle styf vas. "Nee,

jy het nie. Jy staan nou al vir 'n geruime tyd op jou eie bene." Sy neem haar hande weg. "Gaan terug Merritt toe, terug werk toe, terug na jou vriende toe! Die tyd sal vinniger verbygaan."

Het sy regtig gedink sy sou welkom wees? "Ek kan nie teruggaan werk toe nie!"

"Hoekom nie?"

"Ek's swanger."

Mamma sit agteroor op haar stoel. "O. Nou ja, dit verander dinge." Sy glimlag en daar is 'n sagte gloed in haar oë. "Jy en Elizabeth sal baie te gesels hê. Gaan sê hallo. Hulle sal bly wees om jou te sien. En daar is baie plek in die Musashi's se huis. Hy het destyds mos 'n groot kamer vir die meisies gebou."

Mamma loop saam met haar. "Kyk wat het die kat hier aangebring."

Hoe tipies van Mamma om dit op so 'n manier te sê.

Bernie kom haastig oor die erf aangestryk, gryp Hildie en swaai haar so vinnig in die rondte dat haar voete van die grond af lig. Sy lag vir die eerste keer in weke. "Sit my neer, Bernie!"

"Versigtig, Bernhard. Jou suster is swanger."

Bernie sit Hildie neer. "So wrintie. Hoe ver is jy?"

"Drie maande." Sy kyk hoe Mamma oor die straat terugloop. Hildie kan haar amper voorstel hoe sy haar hande afstof, dankbaar dat sy alles so vinnig kon afhandel.

"Elizabeth is ses maande. Sy is nog steeds elke oggend so siek soos 'n hond. Ek het gedink sy het vir jou geskryf. Die brief het seker verlore geraak met al jou rondtrekkery saam met daardie man van jou." Hy slaan sy arm om haar en lei haar na die Musashi's se huis. "Sy gaan so bly wees om jou te sien. Sy is maar eensaam."

Bernie steek vas, sy gesig stroef. "Ek moet jou waarsku, vir ingeval jy dalk wil besluit om eerder nie hier te bly nie. Ons vensters is met klippe stukkend gegooi. Meneer Hutchinson het my gister 'n Japannese boetie genoem. Dis seker te verstane. Sy seun het by Pearl Harbor gesneuwel, maar dit help nie om hom te probeer vertel dat die Musashi's niks daarmee te doen gehad het nie. Mense sien Japannese spioene agter elke bos, en 'n paar Duitses ook. Verstaan jy wat ek sê, Hildie?"

"Ja." Vrees verander sommige mense in dwase.

Toe Bernie en Hildie inkom, draai Elizabeth om van waar sy by die wasbak staan. Vir 'n lang oomblik kyk Hildemara met 'n verpleegstersoog na haar. *Wonderwerke gebeur*, dink sy. Hildie hoop dat hierdie swangerskap een daarvan is.

“Hildie.” Elizabeth praat sag. “Ek’s so bly jy’s by die huis.” Hulle omhels.

Toe Hildie speurend in Elizabeth se oë kyk, bloos haar vriendin en kyk weg. Hildie wil huil.

Bernie neem Hildie in Mamma se Model T om haar bagasie by die stasie te gaan haal. Hy kry die trommel met inspanning op die agtersitplek gelaai. “Jy het meer goed as toe jy die vorige keer huis toe gekom het!”

“Mevrou Henderson, my hospita, het ’n verkoping gehou voordat ek uit Tacoma weg is. Sy wil haar huis van die hand sit en by haar dogter gaan bly. Ek het haar gehelp om bokse bo uit haar solder te gaan haal en alles te prys. Jy sal nie glo hoeveel goed sy deur die jare bymekaargemaak het nie. Van die loseerders het goed agtergelaat en haar man het ’n winkel gehad. Hy het allerhande dinge verkoop, onder andere porselein. Haar kelder was gepak! Sy het vir my twaalf verskillende plekstelle uit sy winkel gegee: Royal Doulton, Wedgwood, Spode en Villeroy and Boch. En sy het vir my ’n paar linnetafeldoeke gegee. Ons kan alles gebruik as jy en Elizabeth wil.”

“Ons sal jou trommel in die skuur bêre. Hou al daardie mooi goed vir wanneer jy en Trip huis opsit. Elizabeth het al die Musashi’s se borde en kombuisware weggepak. Ons gebruik ons eie.”

Bernie het blykbaar nog minder sekuriteit as sy. “Wat gaan julle doen wanneer die Musashi’s terugkom?”

“Ons sal maar wag en kyk wat gebeur.”

Met die Martins wat in die groot huis bly en deelboer, voel dit asof Bernie se huis en werk van hom af weggeneem is. “Wie se idee was dit om na die Musashi’s te plek te verhuis?”

“Ek en Mamma het terselfdertyd op die idee gekom. Dit het my die dag getref toe ek die Musashi’s met een tas elk sien wegloop. Dit het nie reg gevoel nie.”

“Dankie dat ek hier by julle kan bly, Bernie.”

Bernie kyk droog na haar. “Dink jy ek sou my swanger suster sonder ’n dak oor haar kop laat bly?”

“Mamma sou.”

Hy kyk geïrriteerd na haar. “Wat ’n ding om te sê.”

Sy voel skaam en op die verdediging. “Ek het niks van die Martins geweet nie. Toe ek laas gehoor het, het jy daar geboer.”

“Dinge verander.” Hy gee ’n humorlose laggie. “Ek het gehuil toe ek die Musashi’s sien weggaan. Mamma was so kwaad sy kon slange vang. Sy het gesê dis nie reg nie. Sy het briewe geskryf en almal gebel

wat sou luister. Sy het al die pad Sacramento toe gery om met iemand in die regering te gaan praat. Hulle wou weet waar sý vandaan kom. Ons het besluit om die Musashi's se plaas aan die gang te hou. As die belasting nie betaal word nie, sal hulle die plek verloor. Ek en Mamma en Elizabeth het besluit dat dit op die oomblik die beste manier is om sake te hanteer. Die Martins is goeie mense, Hildie. Hulle sal die plek soos hulle eie oppas, en Mamma is gerieflik in die kothuis."

Terwyl Bernie haar trommel skuur toe dra, neem Hildemara haar tas binnetoe. Elizabeth het tafel gedek. Sy kyk oor haar skouer na Hildie en draai dan weer na die stoof.

"Iets ruik heerlik."

"Bredie." Elizabeth se stem klink gesmoord.

Elizabeth sê amper nie 'n woord aan tafel nie. Bernie praat oor die werk wat gedoen moet word. Hildie vertel hoe dit was om van die een plek na die volgende agter Trip aan te trek. "En nou was daar nie plek in die herberg nie." Sy haal haar skouers op en probeer nie aan die baie maande dink voordat sy Trip weer gaan sien nie.

"Ek het probeer aansluit." Bernie laat val sy servet op die tafel. "Ek's so sterk soos 'n os, maar hulle wou my nie vat nie. Ek het uit die staanspoor twee merkies teen my gehad. Ek is 'n enigste seun en 'n boer. Aan die ander kant is daar dalk 'n ander rede waarom hulle my nie wil hê. Bernhard Waltert is nie regtig 'n Amerikaanse naam nie." Hy staan op. "Ek moet gaan werk."

Hildie kyk van die deur na Elizabeth met haar mismoedige uitdrukking. "Gaan dit regtig so sleg?"

"Laas in die dorp het iemand hom 'n lafaard genoem."

Hildie sit Bernie se bord op hare en begin afdek. "Idiote!"

"Ek sal die skottelgoed was, Hildie."

"Ek wil my deel doen terwyl ek hier bly. Jy het kos gemaak. Ek was."

Elizabeth sit kop onderstebo. "Jy weet, nè?"

Hildie staan by die wasbak en sluit haar oë. Sy wil maak asof sy nie verstaan nie. Terwyl sy haar hande afdroog, kom sy terug en gaan sit. Elizabeth kan haar nie in die oë kyk nie. "Wie is die pa?"

Elizabeth se skouers ruk asof sy geklap is. "Ek is lief vir hom. Jy weet dit."

Hildie se moed sak. Sy wil Elizabeth gryp en haar skud. "Wie?"

Elizabeth kyk op. Haar oë is groot en haar mond bewe. "Bernie. Ek is lief vir Bernie!" Haar stem breek. Sy laat sak haar gesig in haar hande.

“Weet hy?”

“Hoe het jy?”

Hildie jok. “Die kyk op jou gesig toe ek by die deur inkom, die manier waarop jy my nie in die oë kon kyk nie. Weet Bernie?”

Elizabeth skud haar kop. “Hy weet daar is iets fout.” Sy vee haar trane af. “Hy verstaan nie hoekom ek die hele tyd huil nie. Die dokter het vir hom gesê dit het iets met hormone te doen.” Sy kyk op en lyk bang. “Gaan jy vir hom sê?”

“Ek is nie die een wat iets vir my broer gaan sê wat hom gaan breek nie. Dit is jou geheim, Elizabeth, nie myne nie.” Nietemin, sy moet weet. “Jy het nie gesê wie die pa is nie.”

“Eddie Rinckel.”

Bernie se beste vriend? “O, Elizabeth.” Hildie staan op en beweeg weg. “Hoe kon jy?” Sy voel naar. Sy wil Elizabeth klap, op haar skree.

“Haat jy my?”

Hildie sluit haar oë. “Ja. Ek dink so.” Sy bewe toe sy weer kombuis toe gaan om die skottelgoed klaar te maak. Elizabeth staan swyend op en loop na die kamer wat sy met Bernie deel.

Hildemara se trane loop toe sy later in die bed lê en na die naggeluide luister.

Skielik word die deur oopgestamp. Dis Bernie. “Brand! Kom! Ek het hulp nodig!”

Hildie gryp haar kamerjas en hardloop. Elizabeth is langs Bernie besig om die vlamme te slaan. Die Martins, al ses van hulle, en Mamma in haar nagrok, kom met grawe aangehardloop. Dit neem hulle ’n uur, maar hulle slaag daarin om die vlamme dood te slaan en te versmoor. Die brand het in die alfalfa-land ontstaan.

Mamma gooi haar lang vlegsel oor haar skouer en vee die roet aan haar nagrok af. “Ons moet ’n hond kry.” Dash is dood in die tyd toe Hildemara verpleging studeer het.

Bernie gee ’n siniese laggie. “Maak dit twee, Mamma.”

## Chapter 39

Trip called late one evening. Hildemara rejoiced at the sound of his voice. "I got your letter. I've only got a few minutes to talk. So listen. I want you safe. Go back to Colorado and live with my parents. They'd love to have you."

She shouldn't have told him about the fire or *Jap lover* painted in red on the barn wall. "I'm not turning my back on my friends. The Musashis are as American as you and I. They've been our neighbors for years. Mr. Musashi taught Papa how to prune the almond trees and vines. Papa fixed his well and his truck. I went to school with the Musashi girls. Bernie played football and basketball and—"

"Hildie . . ."

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

Bernie laughed while sitting at the kitchen table with Elizabeth. "She's beginning to sound like Mama."

"Rocks through windows? A field on fire?" Trip sounded angry. "Sounds like you're in a war zone."

"Maybe we are, but it's a different war than you'll be fighting." Tears sprang to her eyes. She tried to calm down. "Things will settle down. People have known us around here for years, Trip. Papa was well loved, even if he was German." She couldn't help the edge in her tone. "We're sitting tight and keeping this place going. You take care of yourself." She wiped tears away at the thought of what Trip would soon face. Fear had become a constant companion, robbing her of sleep, stealing her appetite. Other sorrows came to bear, as well. Elizabeth, for one. Hildemara struggled with disappointment and the sense of betrayal, for Bernie's sake.

"I've got to go."

Hildie heard voices in the background and knew a line had probably formed at the base telephone. "Trip!" Her voice broke. She didn't want their last conversation to be an argument. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Take care of our baby."

She heard something in his voice. "You received orders, didn't you?"

"We're shipping out."

"When?"

"Soon. If anything happens to me—"

"Don't say it! Don't you dare!"

"I love you, Hildie. Stay safe." He hung up.

Hildie's hand shook as she put the receiver back on its cradle. It struck like a blow to the heart that she might never hear Trip's voice again.

* * *

Bernie looked at Hildemara over his cup of coffee before dawn the next morning. "You look awful. Do you have morning sickness, too?"

"I just can't sleep for worrying."

"Elizabeth doesn't feel well enough to get up." He stole a brief glance toward the bedroom door and looked straight at Hildie. "You two have words or something?"

"No. Why would we?"

He put his cup down carefully. "I know about the baby."

"Oh, Bernie." She put her hand over her mouth, wanting to sob at the look on his face.

"It's my fault, you know." He grimaced. "I found out after I married her I couldn't give her children." He looked at her again. "We'd been trying. Doc told me mumps can make a man . . . well, you know, not worth anything."

"Don't say that."

"I'm a coward, Hildie. I didn't have guts enough to tell Elizabeth the truth. I was afraid I'd lose her. I probably will anyway."

She'd never seen her brother so despondent. "She says she loves you." She put her hand over his. "I believe her."

"It was Eddie." His eyes filled. "He told me himself."

Hildemara went hot. "Bragging?"

"No. Far from it. I knew something had been tearing him up inside. We went out for a couple of drinks before he left for basic training. He signed into the Marines. He had last-minute jitters. Wondered if he was brave enough. He got so drunk, he could hardly walk. When I dropped him off, he kept saying how sorry he was, how he wished I'd kill him, and then the Japs wouldn't have to bother. When I asked him what in the blazes he was talking about, he told me."

"He should've kept his big mouth shut!"

Bernie gave her a sad smile. "He's been in love with Elizabeth since before we came to town. I'm the one who stole her from him, not the other way around."

"That's no excuse. Not for either one of them."

Glaring at her, he rubbed his head, agitated. "Don't judge her.

Some people were giving her a hard time in town, saying I was a coward for not joining up, calling us Jap lovers and Mama a dirty Nazi. Eddie stepped in and told them to shut up and back off. He gave her a ride home. Only they didn't come back right away. She was scared to death of what I might do when I found out. And he knew I'd head into town and have more than words with a few of those . . ." Bernie rubbed his face. "Anyway, they stopped at Grand Junction. He just wanted to calm her down before bringing her home. They started talking about old times, good times. She was still crying, shaken up. He held her, comforted her. That's how it started, I guess. It just didn't end there."

Bernie's face twisted, anguished. "I couldn't hate him. Not even when he told me. What right have I got to throw stones at anyone?" His eyes filled. "He's dead, you know. Got blown to bits on some piece of crap island in the South Pacific. He used to tell me he wanted to go to the beach. 'Let's go over to Santa Cruz,' he'd say. Well, he died on a beach."

Hildie put her face in her hands and sobbed. All she could think about was Trip on his way to Europe. She'd told herself over and over he was a medic. Thank God, he wasn't a Marine. They wouldn't put him in the front lines. He would follow, picking up the pieces.

Bernie gripped her shoulder. "Go gentle on my wife. She's eating herself up with guilt. And I love her; I love her so much. As far as I'm concerned, that baby she's carrying is mine."

Hildie raised her head. "Maybe you should tell her."

"Tell her what?"

"Everything."

He shook his head. "She might leave me."

She leaned over and cupped his face. "You haven't left her."

He pulled away and stood. "Two wrongs don't make things right, Sis."

"What good is love without trust?"

"What are you two talking about?" Elizabeth stood in the bedroom doorway, still in her nightgown, arms hugged around herself. She looked sick and frightened, pale and strained. She looked at Hildie and then Bernie, bereft. "Did you . . . ?"

"Did she tell me the baby isn't mine? No, sugar. She didn't. I already knew."

Elizabeth made a choking sound and stepped back, hands covering her face.

Bernie pulled a chair back. “Come and sit down with me. We need to talk.”

Hildie couldn’t bear the pain she saw in both their faces, the guilt and shame, the heartbreak. She got up. “I love you both.” She went outside.

Sitting in Mrs. Musashi’s chair out front, she watched the sunrise while Bernie and Elizabeth talked inside the house. No screaming, no shouting like Mama and Papa. The silence worried her and she stood, looking through the window. Elizabeth sat on Bernie’s lap, her arms wrapped around his shoulders. He held her firmly, stroking her back as both wept.

Relief filled Hildie. She envied the fact that they could be together through this war and not have to be separated. She didn’t like feeling that way. She went out for a long walk through the Musashis’ English walnut orchard, thanking God Bernie and Elizabeth would be all right. She prayed for Trip’s safety. She ran her hands over her abdomen, praying their baby would be born healthy and strong. She prayed the next battle would turn the tide of the war and it would end soon.

Thinking of Trip filled her with so many emotions: worry, fear, hope, hunger, an aching loneliness to have him back beside her. *God, please bring him home to me. Bring him home in one piece.*

* * *

As summer moved toward fall, townsfolk had another reason to resent Bernie and Mama and anyone else in their situation. Rationing kept people in want, but farmers had plenty. Mama’s forty acres of almonds and raisins and her half-acre vegetable garden, along with chickens and rabbits, produced enough to feed both families and have plenty to sell. Bernie kept up the walnut orchard, vineyard, and two acres of produce, making runs to Merced to sell tomatoes, squash, onions, and carrots. The Musashis had two cows, both healthy; a hundred chickens; a dozen rabbits; and four goats. Bernie added a dog. He called him Killer as a joke, though passersby believed it and kept their distance. Never lacking in food, Mama said they should give away whatever they could spare to neighbors and friends in town, keeping only enough for mortgage payments and taxes on the two places.

Hildemara blossomed with her pregnancy. So did Elizabeth. They laughed as they waddled around the place. Weeding became more difficult as the months passed. Bernie and Elizabeth’s son came in

September. They named him Edward Niclas Waltert.

Mama checked the mailbox every day. Hildemara went across to get their mail. Mama would sift through the envelopes and sigh heavily.

When Hildemara's labor started, Bernie went for Mama. Rather than drive to town for Dr. Whiting, Mama came across the street to help deliver the baby. Hildemara was too far along to argue. She had already told Elizabeth what to do to get ready.

Mama leaned over Hildie, wiping sweat from her forehead. "You scream if you want to."

Hildie knew Mama expected her to be worse than Elizabeth, who had screamed and sobbed and begged for the pain to stop. Hildie had been in hospital delivery rooms. She knew what to expect. She had no intention of making it worse for all those around her. She didn't look at Mama or listen to anything she said. She concentrated on the course of her labor, enduring the pain in silence and bearing down when her body told her it was time.

"You have a son, Hildemara Rose." Mama washed and swaddled him and placed him in her arms. "What are you going to call him?"

Exhausted, Hildie smiled into his perfect face. "Trip likes the name Charles."

She wrote to Trip the next day.

*Our son arrived on December 15. Charles Cale Arundel has very healthy lungs! Mama says she can hear him across the street. He and Eddie are going to make quite a pair. . . .*

She wrote every day, sometimes in a way to sound like Charles was writing the letter.

*Daddy, come home soon. I can't wait to meet you. You have to teach me how to play basketball and baseball. . . .*

Giving birth took more of her strength than she expected. Or maybe it was the night feedings that seemed to sap her of strength. Elizabeth had been up and around a few days after giving birth, but Hildemara felt so tired all the time. She feared relapsing with tuberculosis.

Mama came over every day. "Get some sleep. Let me hold my grandson."

* * *

*Dear Rosie,*

*Hildemara Rose has given me a second grandson. She has named him Charles Cale Arundel. She did well. No screaming or*

*carrying on. The only time she shed a tear was when she held her newborn son in her arms. Then she cried a river of joyful tears.*

*I remember giving birth to Hildemara on the floor of the cabin in that frozen Manitoba wheatland. I cried! I think I cursed Niclas when he came home and found me. Poor man. I have never been easy on anyone, especially those I love most.*

*My girl did better than I, but I'm worried. Hildemara has not bounced back to good health the way Elizabeth did. She looks so pale and worn down. Nursing every two hours is exhausting, and I fear my girl may get sick again. I offer to help, but she gives me a look that sends me home. So I bring dinner sometimes, just to give these two girls rest.*

*Hildemara Rose and I get along, but there is a wall between us. I know I built it. I doubt she's forgiven me for my harsh words at the sanatorium, and I will not apologize for them. I may have to prod her again. I'll do whatever I must to keep her spirits up. Oh, but it hurts me so to do it. I wonder if she will ever understand me.*

* * *

After spending almost a month in bed, Hildie began to regain her strength. Mama made a sling for her so she could carry Charlie around while doing chores. He rode happily, cradled safely against Hildie's chest. When he grew too big to ride in the sling, Mama designed a backpack. When he began to crawl, Hildie and Elizabeth took turns watching their "little explorers."

Bernie laughed as the two boys crawled around the house. "They need sunshine, but I think we're going to have to cage them."

The Allies pressed on. Battles raged in Germany and in the South Pacific. Hildie wondered if the war would ever end and Trip come home.

## Hoofstuk 39

Trip bel laat een aand. Hildemara is oorstelp van blydskap toe sy sy stem hoor. "Ek het jou brief gekry. Ek het net 'n paar minute om te praat. Luister na my. Ek wil hê jy moet veilig wees. Gaan Colorado toe en gaan bly by my ouers. Dit sal vir hulle wonderlik wees om jou daar te hê."

Sy moes hom nie vertel het van die brand of *Japannese Boetie* wat in rooi teen die skuur se muur geverf is nie. "Ek gaan nie my rug op my vriende draai nie. Die Musashi's is net so Amerikaans soos ek en jy. Hulle was jare lank ons bure. Meneer Musashi het Pappa geleer om amandelbome en druiwe te snoei. Pappa het sy put en sy vragmotor reggemaak. Ek was saam met die Musashi-meisies in die skool. Bernie het voetbal en basketbal en – "

"Hildie ... "

"Moenie oor my bekommerd wees nie. Ek kan na myself kyk."

Bernie lag waar hy en Elizabeth by die kombuistafel sit. "Jy begin nou net soos Mamma klink."

"Klippe deur vensters? 'n Brand?" Sy kan hoor Trip is kwaad. "Dit klink asof jy in 'n oorlogsone is."

"Dalk is ons, maar dis 'n ander oorlog as joune in die weermag." Haar oë skiet vol trane en sy probeer kalmeer. "Dinge sal beter word. Die mense hier ken ons al jare lank, Trip. Pappa was baie geliefd, al was hy 'n Duitser." Sy kan nie die skerp klank uit haar stem hou nie. "Ons gaan net hier bly en die plaas aan die gang hou. Kyk jy na jouself." Sy vee haar trane af by die gedagte aan wat Trip binnekort gaan trotseer. Vrees is nou 'n konstante metgesel wat haar van haar slaap beroof en haar eetlus steel. En daar is ander smarte. Elizabeth, om maar een te noem. Hildemara worstel met teleurstelling en die gevoel van verraad teenoor Bernie.

"Ek moet gaan."

Hildie hoor stemme in die agtergrond en weet dat daar waarskynlik 'n ry ouens is wat wil bel. "Trip!" Haar stem breek. Sy wil nie hê hulle laaste gesprek moet 'n argument wees nie. "Ek's lief vir jou."

“En ek vir jou. Kyk mooi na ons baba.”

Sy hoor iets in sy stem. “Julle het bevel ontvang, nè?”

“Ons is op pad.”

“Wanneer?”

“Binnekort. As enigiets met my gebeur – ”

“Moet dit nie sê nie! Waag dit net!”

“Ek is lief vir jou, Hildie. Veilig bly.” Hy lui af.

Hildie se hand bewe toe sy die telefoon neersit. Dit skeur soos ’n pyl deur haar hart dat sy Trip se stem dalk nooit weer gaan hoor nie.

***

Die volgende oggend kyk Bernie oor sy koppie koffie na Hildemara. “Jy lyk vreeslik. Het jy ook oggendnaarheid?”

“Ek kan net nie slaap van bekommernis nie.”

“Elizabeth voel nie goed genoeg om op te staan nie.” Hy kyk vinnig na die kamerdeur en kyk dan reguit na Hildie. “Het julle twee woorde gehad of iets?”

“Nee. Hoekom sou ons?”

Hy sit sy koppie versigtig neer. “Ek weet van die baba.”

“Ag, Bernie.” Sy plaas haar hand oor haar mond en wil huil oor dit wat sy in sy oë sien.

“Dis my skuld.” Hy gryns. “Nadat ek met Elizabeth getrou het, het ek uitgevind dat ek nie vir haar kan kinders gee nie.” Hy kyk weer na haar. “Ons het probeer. Dok het vir my gesê dat pampoentjies kan maak dat ’n man … ag, jy weet, niks werd is nie.”

“Moenie dit sê nie.”

“Ek is ’n lafaard, Hildie. Ek het nie genoeg moed gehad om dit vir Elizabeth te sê nie. Ek was bang ek sou haar verloor. Ek sal waarskynlik in elk geval.”

Sy het haar broer nog nooit so neerslagtig gesien nie. “Sy sê sy is lief vir jou.” Sy plaas haar hand oor syne. “Ek glo haar.”

“Dit was Eddie.” Sy oë skiet vol trane. “Hy het my self vertel.”

Hildemara word warm. “Het hy dit in jou gesig kom gooi?”

“Nee. Inteendeel. Ek het geweet dat iets hom van binne af opvreet. Ons het ’n paar drankies gaan drink voordat hy weg is vir sy basiese opleiding. Hy het by die vloot aangesluit. Hy het begin koue voete kry. Nie geweet of hy dapper genoeg was nie. Hy het so dronk geword dat hy skaars kon loop. Toe ek hom gaan aflaai, het hy bly sê hoe

jammer hy is, hoe hy wens dat ek hom wil doodmaak, dat die Japannese dan nie hoef te sukkel nie. Toe ek hom vra wat op aarde hy bedoel, het hy my vertel."

"Hy moes eerder net stilgebly het!"

Bernie glimlag hartseer. "Hy was destyds al verlief voordat ons in Murietta aangekom het. Dis ek wat haar by hom gesteel het, nie andersom nie."

"Dis nie 'n verskoning nie. Nie vir een van hulle nie."

Hy gee haar 'n donker kyk en vryf ergerlik oor sy kop. "Moet haar nie oordeel nie. Sommige mense was gemeen met haar toe sy dorp toe is, het gesê dat ek 'n lafaard is omdat ek nie gaan veg nie. Hulle het ons Jap-boeties genoem, en vir Mamma 'n vuil Nazi. Eddie het tussenbeide gekom en gesê hulle moet stilbly en haar uitlos. Hy het haar huis toe gebring. Die ding is net, hulle het nie dadelik huis toe gekom nie. Sy was bang oor wat ek sou doen as ek uitvind wat op die dorp gebeur het. En hy het geweet dat ek sou inry en dat daar nie net woorde gewissel sou word nie ... " Bernie vryf oor sy gesig. "In elk geval, hulle het by die Grand Junction stilgehou. Hy wou haar net tot bedaring bring voordat hy haar huis toe bring. Hulle het oor die ou dae, die goeie tye begin praat. Sy het nog steeds gehuil, was nog steeds ontsteld. Hy haar vasgehou en haar getroos. Dis seker maar hoe dit begin het. Ongelukkig het dit nie daar opgehou nie."

Bernie se gesig vertrek. "Ek kon hom nie haat nie. Nie eens toe hy my vertel het nie. Watter reg het ek om klippe te gooi?" Sy trane kom. "Hy is dood. Opgeblaas op 'n klein eiland iewers in die Stille Oseaan. Hy was altyd lus om strand toe te gaan. 'Kom ons gaan deur Santa Cruz toe,' sou hy sê. En nou het hy op 'n strand gesterf."

Hildie druk haar gesig in haar hande en snik. Al waaraan sy kan dink, is Trip wat op pad is Europa toe. Sy sê vir haarself oor en oor dat hy 'n paramedikus is. Hulle sal hom nie in die voorste linies plaas nie. Hy sal agterna kom om die stukke op te tel.

Bernie vat haar aan die skouer. "Wees sag met my vrou. Sy word opgeëet deur skuldgevoelens. En ek is lief vir haar; ek is so lief vir haar. Wat my betref, is dit my babatjie wat sy dra."

Hildie kyk op. "Miskien moet jy vir haar sê."

"Wat vir haar sê?"

"Alles."

Hy skud sy kop. "Sy sal my los."

Sy leun oor en kelk sy gesig in haar hande. "Jy het haar nie gelos nie."

Hy draai sy gesig weg en staan op. “Twee verkeerde dinge maak nie ’n regte nie, Sus.”

“Wat beteken liefde as daar nie vertroue is nie?”

“Waaroor praat julle twee?” Elizabeth staan in die kamerdeur, steeds in haar nagrok, haar arms om haarself gevou. Sy lyk siek en bang, bleek en gespanne. Sy kyk na Hildie en dan Bernie. “Het jy ... ?”

“Het sy vir my gesê dat ek nie die pa is nie? Nee, my lief. Sy het nie. Ek het reeds geweet.”

Elizabeth maak ’n stikkende geluid en tree terug, haar hande oor haar gesig.

Bernie trek ’n stoel uit. “Kom sit hier by my. Ons moet praat.”

Hildie kan dit nie verduur om die pyn op hulle gesigte te sien nie, die skuld en skaamte, die smart. Sy staan op. “Ek is lief vir julle al twee.” Sy gaan buitentoe.

Sy gaan sit op mevrou Musashi se stoel op die voorstoep en kyk hoe die son opkom terwyl Bernie en Elizabeth binnekant praat. Daar is nie ’n gegil of geskree soos met Mamma en Pappa nie. Die stilte maak haar bekommerd en sy staan op om deur die venster te kyk. Elizabeth sit op Bernie se skoot, haar arms om sy skouers geslaan. Hy hou haar styf vas en streel oor haar rug en hulle albei huil.

Die verligting spoel deur Hildie. Sy is afgunstig op die feit dat hulle deur hierdie oorlog bymekaar kan wees. Sy hou nie daarvan om so te voel nie. Sy gaan stap stadig deur die Musashi’s se okkerneutboord en dank God dat Bernie en Elizabeth hulle dinge kon uitsorteer. Sy bid vir Trip se veiligheid. Sy vryf oor haar maag en bid dat hulle baba sterk en gesond gebore sal word. Sy bid dat die volgende veldslag die gety van die oorlog sal draai en dat daar binnekort vrede sal wees.

Haar gedagtes aan Trip vul haar met soveel emosies: kommer, vrees, hoop, honger, ’n skreiende eensaamheid en smagting om hom weer terug by haar te hê. *Here, bring hom asseblief na my toe terug. Bring hom terug in een stuk.*

***

Met die somer se oorgang na herfs het die dorpsmense nog ’n rede om Bernie en Mamma en enigiemand anders in ’n soortgelyke situasie te verag. Terwyl die rantsoenering die mense verarm, het die boere oorgenoeg. Mamma se 20 morg amandels en rosyne en haar halwe morg groente, tesame met die hoenders en hase is genoeg om albei

gesinne gevoed te hou en heelwat oor te hê om te verkoop. Bernie versorg die okkerneutboord, wingerd en twee morg groente. Hy gaan dikwels Merced toe om tamaties, pampoen, uie en wortels te verkoop. Die Musashi's het twee koeie, albei gesond, 100 hoenders, 'n dosyn hase, en vier bokke. Bernie koop 'n hond wat hy Killer noem. Dis eintlik bedoel as 'n grap, maar verbygangers glo dit en kom nie naby die werf nie. In die lig van hulle oorvloed sê Mamma hulle behoort alles wat hulle kan afknyp vir die bure en vriende op die dorp te gee en net genoeg vir die verband en belasting op die twee plase oor te hou.

Hildemara sowel as Elizabeth blom in hulle wagtyd. Hulle lag terwyl hulle met groot mae hulle takies verrig. Dit word al moeiliker om in die groentetuin te werk. Bernie en Elizabeth se seuntjie word in September gebore. Hulle noem hom Edward Niclas Waltert.

Mamma haal elke dag pos uit en Hildemara loop oor om hulle pos te gaan kry. Nadat Mamma deur die koeverte gesif het, gee sy altyd 'n swaar sug.

Toe Hildemara begin kraam, gaan roep Bernie vir Mamma. Eerder as om dokter Whiting op die dorp te gaan haal, haas Mamma haar oor die straat en help met die geboorte. Hildemara is te ver heen om te stry. Sy het alreeds vir Elizabeth gesê wat om te doen om gereed te maak.

Mamma leun oor Hildie en vee die sweet van haar voorkop af. "Jy kan skree as jy wil."

Hildie weet dat Mamma van haar verwag om erger as Elizabeth te wees. Dié het geskree en gesnik en gepleit dat die pyn moes ophou. Hildie was al in kraamsale. Sy weet wat om te verwag. Sy is geensins van voorneme om dit vir almal rondom haar erger te maak nie. Sy kyk nie na Mamma nie en luister nie na enigiets wat sy sê nie. Sy konsentreer op die proses en verduur die pyn in stilte en druk wanneer haar liggaam vir haar sê dat dit tyd is.

"Jy het 'n seun, Hildemara Rose." Mamma was hom en nadat sy hom toegedraai het, lê sy hom in haar arms. "Wat gaan jy hom noem?"

Hildie glimlag uitgeput in sy volmaakte gesiggie. "Trip hou van die naam Charles."

Die volgende dag skryf sy vir Trip.

> *Ons seun is op 15 Desember gebore. Charles Cale Arundel het baie gesonde longetjies! Mamma sê sy kan hom tot by haar plek hoor. Hy en Eddie gaan groot maatjies wees ...*

Sy skryf elke dag, soms op ’n manier wat klink asof Charles die brief skryf.

> *Pappa, kom gou huis toe. Ek kan nie wag om Pappa te ontmoet nie. Pappa moet my leer om basketbal en bofbal te speel …*

Die geboorte het meer van haar krag opgeëis as wat verwag het. Of dalk is dit die nagvoedings wat haar van haar krag beroof. Elizabeth was ’n paar dae nadat sy geboorte geskenk het, weer op en aan die gang, maar Hildemara bly moeg. Sy is bang dat dit weer tuberkulose is.

Mamma kom elke dag kyk hoe dit gaan. “Slaap ’n bietjie. Gee dat ek my kleinseun kan vashou.”

* * *

> *Liewe Rosie*
>
> *Hildemara Rose het my ’n tweede kleinseun gegee. Sy het hom Charles Cale Arundel genoem. Sy het goed gedoen en glad nie geskree of tekere gegaan nie. Die enigste keer dat sy ’n traan gestort het, was toe sy haar pasgebore seun in haar arms gehou het. Toe het haar trane van blydskap soos ’n rivier geloop.*
>
> *Ek onthou hoe ek op die vloer van die houthuis in die bevrore Manitoba aan Hildemara geboorte geskenk het. Hoe het ek nie geskree nie! Ek dink ek het Niclas gevloek toe hy terugkom en my so by die huis aangetref het. Die arme man. Ek was nog nooit ’n sagte een nie, veral nie met die mense vir wie ek die liefste is nie.*
>
> *My dogter het beter as ek gevaar, maar ek’s bekommerd. Hildemara het nie haar kragte so gou soos Elizabeth herwin nie. Sy lyk so bleek en afgemat. Die twee-uurlikse voeding is uitmergelend, en ek is bang dat my meisiekind weer gaan siek word. Ek bied aan om te help, maar sy kyk na my met oë wat my huis toe stuur. Dus neem ek soms vir hulle kos, net om die twee dogters ’n ruskansie te gee.*
>
> *Ek en Hildemara Rose kom oor die weg, maar daar is ’n muur tussen ons. Ek weet ek het dit gebou. Ek weet nie of sy my al vir my harde woorde by die sanatorium vergewe het nie, en ek sal nie daarvoor verskoning maak nie. Ek sal haar dalk weer onder hande moet neem. Ek sal alles moontlik doen om haar gemotiveerd te hou. Maar dit maak so seer om dit te doen. Ek wonder of sy my ooit sal verstaan.*

* * *

Nadat sy amper ’n maand in die bed deurgebring het, begin Hildie haar kragte herwin. Mamma maak ’n spesiale draagdoek sodat sy Charlie kan dra terwyl sy met haar take besig is. Hy is doodgelukkig so veilig teen Hildie se bors. Toe hy te groot word om in die doek te ry, ontwerp Mamma ’n rugsak. Toe hy begin kruip, maak Hildie en Elizabeth beurte om hulle “klein ontdekkingsreisigers” op te pas.

Bernie lag wanneer die twee seuntjies in die huis rondkruip. “Hulle het sonlig nodig, maar ek dink ons gaan vir hulle ’n eie kampie moet bou.”

Die Geallieerde magte beur voort terwyl veldslae in Duitsland en in die Stille Suidsee woed. Hildie wonder of die oorlog ooit gaan einde kry en Trip gaan huis toe kom.

## Chapter 40

### 1944

The war finally began to turn in the Allies' favor, and every day brought new hope as they listened to the radio.

Bernie started making plans. "We're not staying in Murietta. When the war ends, the Musashis will come back. Everything will be ready for them, and we'll look for our own place. I made good money off those trees I grafted. Lemon-orange-lime trees." He laughed. "I'd like to start my own nursery, do some more grafting. Experiment a little and see what else I can come up with. I could do landscaping. Might be nice to live closer to Sacramento or San Jose or in sunny Southern California near all those movie stars Cloe writes about. They'd have money to spend."

Hildemara didn't know what to do. She had written to Trip every day and hadn't received a letter in weeks. Every time a car came up the road, her heart lodged in her throat for fear it would stop and an Army officer would come to the door. Eddie Rinckel wasn't the only hometown boy killed overseas. Tony Reboli had died on D-day. So had two of Mama's Summer Bedlam boys, and Fritz had lost his leg when he stepped on a land mine on Guadalcanal.

Hildie knew Trip had survived D-day. By the time he reached Paris, he had become a captain. His letters, few and far between, were filled with words of love, what he remembered about their time together, how much he missed her. He didn't write about the future.

The newspapers reported tens of thousands dying on battlefields in Europe, and previously unknown islands in the South Pacific. The prejudice got worse at home. Hildemara continued to go to church with Mama. She left Charlie at home with Bernie and Elizabeth, who had stopped going. Only a few people spoke to Hildemara, and only because they knew Trip served in the Army. Hardly anyone spoke to Mama. Old friends who had known them for years kept their distance, staring and whispering. Mama sat eyes straight ahead, listening to the sermon, Papa's Bible open in her lap.

Hildemara was the one who got mad. After all the nice things Mama had done for people over the years, they turned on her now? "I thought they were our friends!"

"They were. They will be again, when the war is over. Assuming we win, of course. If we don't, we're all going to be in the same sinking boat."

"Fair-weather friends, Mama. They're not real friends."

"They're afraid. Fear makes people mean. Fear makes people act stupid."

"Don't make excuses for them!" Hildemara stared out the window, arms crossed over her chest, hurt and fuming.

Mama shrugged while driving. "When it's all over, we won't hold it against them."

Hildemara turned in exasperation. "*You* won't. I'm not going to have anything to do with those . . . those hypocrites!"

Mama's face flamed. "Where do you get off judging, Hildemara Rose?" She turned sharply in to the drive. Hildemara bumped against the door. "Keep on as you are and you're going to be just as mean-spirited and stupid as they are!" Mama slammed on the brake so hard Hildie had to grab the dash to keep from cracking her head on it.

"Mama! Are you trying to kill us?"

"Just shake a little sense into your head." She shoved her door open and got out. "What do you suppose your father would say to you right now? *Turn the other cheek!* That's what he'd say."

Hildie jumped out and slammed her door. "I never thought I'd hear that come out of your mouth!"

Mama slammed her door harder. "Well, it did." She stomped off toward the cottage.

Hildemara regretted adding fuel to the fire. "Why don't we go to Atwater next Sunday?" she called after Mama. "No one knows us in Atwater! No one will be gossiping about us there!"

Mama swung around and planted her feet. "Don't be so stupid, Hildemara. I still have a Swiss accent."

Smarting under her criticism, Hildie shouted back. "Swiss, Mama! Not German! The Swiss are neutral!"

"Neutral!" She snorted in disgust. "A lot you know. Where do you think Germany gets it munitions? How do you think goods pass from Germany to Italy? If that isn't bad enough, people around here don't know the difference between a Swiss, German, or Swedish accent!"

Hildie's shoulders slumped. "I'm not going back to church."

"Well, fine! *You* run if you want. *You* hide! But I'm going back and I'm going to keep going back! And one of these days, I'll be buried in their churchyard. You make sure of that! You hear me, Hildemara Rose?"

"I hear you, Mama! They'll probably spit on your grave!"

"Let them spit. It'll make the flowers grow!" She slammed the

cottage door behind her.

Bernie stood in the yard across the street. “What was that all about? I could hear you and Mama shouting all the way over here.”

“She’s impossible!”

Bernie laughed as she stormed by. “I never thought I’d see the day that you’d shout back at Mama.”

“It didn’t get me anywhere, did it?”

# Hoofstuk 40

## 1944

Die oorlog begin uiteindelik in die Geallieerdes se guns draai, en elke dag bring nuwe hoop wanneer hulle radio luister.

Bernie begin planne maak. “Ons gaan nie in Murietta bly nie. Wanneer die oorlog verby is, sal die Musashi’s terugkom. Alles gaan vir hulle gereed wees, en ons sal ’n plek van ons eie moet kry. Ek het goeie geld uit my geënte bome gemaak. Suurlemoen-lemoen-lemmetjiebome.” Hy lag. “Ek sal graag met my eie kwekery wil begin, nog oorentings doen. ’n Bietjie eksperimenteer en kyk waarmee ek nog vorendag kan kom. Ek sal dit ook geniet om tuinuitleg te doen. Dit sal dalk lekker wees om nader aan Sacramento of San Jose te bly. Of in Kalifornië naby al daardie filmsterre waarvan Cloe skryf. Hulle het baie geld wat hulle aan plante kan spandeer.”

Hildemara weet nie wat om te doen nie. Sy skryf elke dag vir Trip en het weke laas van hom gehoor. Elke keer wanneer sy ’n voertuig hoor aankom, word sy lam van vrees dat ’n kar sal stilhou en ’n militêre beampte na die deur toe sal kom. Eddie Rinckel is nie die enigste plaaslike jong man wat oorsee gesneuwel het nie. Tony Reboli het tydens die inval op die Normandiese strand gesterf. So ook twee van die seuns wat Mamma se somerkamp bygewoon het. En Fritz het sy been verloor toe hy by die Guadalkanaal op ’n landmyn getrap het.

Hildie weet dat Trip die invalsdag oorleef het. Teen die tyd dat hy in Parys aangekom het, was hy ’n kaptein. In sy enkele briewe skryf hy van sy liefde vir haar, wat hy van hulle tyd saam onthou, hoe hy haar mis. Hy skryf niks van die toekoms nie.

Die koerante berig dat tienduisende op die slagvelde in Europa en voorheen onbekende eilande in die Stille Oseaan sneuwel. Die bevooroordeeldheid tuis vererger. Hildemara gaan steeds saam met Mamma kerk toe. Sy los Charlie tuis by Bernie en Elizabeth wat nie meer kerk toe gaan nie. Net ’n paar mense praat met Hildemara, en net omdat hulle weet dat Trip die land verdedig. Amper niemand

praat met Mamma nie. Ou vriende wat hulle al jare lank ken, staan op ’n afstand en fluister. Mamma kyk stip voor haar wanneer sy na die preek luister, Pappa se Bybel oop op haar skoot.

Hildemara is die een wat kwaad word. Ná al die goeie dinge wat Mamma deur die jare vir hierdie mense gedoen het, is hulle kortsigtig genoeg om nou teen haar te draai. “Ek het gedink hulle is ons vriende!”

“Hulle was. En hulle sal weer wees wanneer die oorlog verby is. Op voorwaarde dat ons wen, natuurlik. As ons verloor, is ons almal in dieselfde sinkende skip.”

“Mooiweersvriende, Mamma. Hulle is nie ware vriende nie.”

“Hulle is bang. Vrees maak mense gemeen. Vrees maak dat mense dom dinge doen.”

“Moenie vir hulle verskoning maak nie!” Hildemara staar seergemaak en kwaad deur die venster, haar arms oor haar bors gevou.

Mamma haal haar skouers op. “Wanneer die hele ding verby is, sal ons dit nie teen hulle hou nie.”

Hildemara draai verontwaardig na haar ma. “*Mamma* sal nie. Ek weier om enigiets met daardie ... daardie huigelaars te doen te hê!”

Mamma se gesig gloei. “Wie gee jou die reg om te oordeel, Hildemara Rose?” Sy draai skerp by die oprit in. Hildemara val teen die deur. “As jy so aanhou, gaan jy net so gemeen en dom soos hulle wees!” Mamma rem so vinnig dat Hildie na die paneelkassie moet gryp om te keer dat sy haar kop oopval.

“Mamma! Wil Ma ons verongeluk?”

“Dis net om jou bietjie tot jou sinne te ruk.” Sy maak haar deur oop en klim uit. “Wat dink jy sou jou Pa nou vir jou gesê het? *Draai die ander wang!* Dis wat hy vir jou sou sê.”

Hildie is dadelik uit en klap haar deur toe. “Ek het nooit gedink ek sou daardie woorde uit Mamma se mond hoor nie!”

Mamma slaan haar deur harder toe. “Wel, daar het jy dit nou gehoor.” En daarmee marsjeer sy na haar kothuis toe.

Hildemara kry spyt oor die olie wat sy op die vuur gegooi het. “Hoekom gaan ons nie volgende Sondag Atwater toe nie?” roep sy agter Mamma aan. “Niemand ken ons in Atwater nie! Niemand sal daar oor ons skinder nie!”

Mamma swaai om en plant haar voete uitmekaar. “Moenie so dom wees nie, Hildemara. Ek het nog steeds ’n Switserse aksent.”

Seergemaak deur Mamma se kritiek, roep Hildie terug. “Switsers,

Mamma! Nie Duits nie! Die Switsers is neutraal!"

"Neutraal!" Sy snork minagtend. "Dit wys jou net hoeveel jy weet. Waar dink jy kry Duitsland sy ammunisie? Hoe dink jy word goedere van Duitsland na Italië vervoer? En asof dit nie erg genoeg is nie, kan die mense hier nie tussen 'n Switserse, Duitse of Sweedse aksent onderskei nie!"

Hildie se skouers hang. "Ek gaan nie weer kerk toe nie."

"Doen net wat jy wil. Jý kan vlug as jy wil. Jý kan wegkruip. Maar ek gaan terug en ek sal bly teruggaan! Eendag sal ek in hulle kerkhof begrawe word. Maak jy seker daarvan! Hoor jy my, Hildemara Rose?"

"Ek hoor, Mamma! Hulle sal waarskynlik op Mamma se graf spoeg!"

"Laat hulle spoeg. Dit sal die blomme laat groei!" Sy slaan die kothuis se deur agter haar toe.

Bernie staan in die erf oorkant die straat. "Waaroor het dit gegaan? Ek het jou en Mamma tot hier hoor skree."

"Sy's onmoontlik!"

Bernie lag toe sy verby hom storm. "Ek het nooit gedink ek sou die dag sien wat jy vir Mamma skree nie."

"Dis nie asof dit my êrens gekry het nie."

## Chapter 41

**1945**

Franklin Roosevelt continued as president, starting his fourth term, with Harry Truman as the new vice president. London was bombarded by V-1 rocket bombs. Mama wrote letters to a friend in Kew Gardens. Rumors were confirmed about Nazi concentration camps exterminating Jews. German officers failed in an assassination attempt on Hitler and were hanged. American soldiers pushed toward Berlin.

Finally, Germany surrendered, though the war raged on against Japan. Thousands died as American troops fought to take back one Pacific island after another.

Trip wrote from Berlin.

*I'm coming home.*

He didn't know when he would arrive, but he would be sent to his city of enlistment, which meant if she wanted to be at the train station to meet him, she needed to return to Colorado. Hildie's joy turned to panic when she saw the letter had taken twelve days to reach her.

Bernie took her to the train station to buy tickets. She prayed she would be able to ride in a Pullman so she and two-year-old Charlie could rest on the three-day trip to Colorado.

By the time they arrived, Hildie had lost weight from motion sickness and was exhausted. The train pulled into Denver midafternoon, and she had to transfer to the Eagle streamliner to Colorado Springs. Carrying Charles on her hip and struggling with her suitcase, she made it just in time. Every muscle in her body ached. She shifted Charles in her arms.

Mom and Dad Arundel stood on the train platform waiting for her in Colorado Springs. Hildemara cried in relief when she saw them. Mom gave her a quick hug and took Charlie. "Oh, he's beautiful! Just like his daddy at this age." She kissed Charlie's plump cheeks while Dad hugged Hildie.

"Any word?" Hildie had dreamed of seeing Trip with them.

"Not yet, but he'll be home any day now." Dad picked up the suitcase. "Only one?"

"Bernie will ship everything as soon as we know where we're going to live."

She felt dead on her feet; she stumbled. Dad caught her beneath

the elbow and looked her over with concern. “You’re going straight to bed when we get to the house. You look like you haven’t slept in three days.”

“Charlie didn’t sleep much on the train.”

Dad smiled. “Well, you’ve got reinforcements now, so you can rest up before Trip gets here.”

Hildie fell asleep the moment her head touched Trip’s pillow in the porch bedroom. She awakened to someone stroking her face. When she opened her eyes, she saw Trip leaning over her, smiling. She thought she was dreaming until he spoke.

“Hey, sleepyhead.”

She reached up and touched his face. Sobbing, she threw her arms around him. He held on to her. Gripping her hair, he drew her head back and kissed her. She tasted salt and realized they were both crying.

Embarrassed, he whispered against her hair. “I’ve missed you so much, Hildie.” She heard the tears in his voice.

She pressed closer, nestling into the curve of his neck, inhaling his scent. “You’re home. Thank God, you’re home.” She could feel the tremor in his hands. If not for his parents in the other room or for Charlie, who was crying again, she might have been bolder. She drew back, smiling, drinking in the sight of her husband. He looked tired. His face hadn’t changed, but his eyes looked older, battle-worn. “What do you think of your son?”

“He’s perfect. He’s sitting on the kitchen rug playing with some of Mom’s wooden spoons. Or he was. I tried to pick him up, but he didn’t think much of the idea.”

“He doesn’t know you yet. He will.” She kept touching him, running her hands over him, her heart squeezing tight at the signs of fatigue, sorrow, joy, all mixed together. His eyes darkened.

“Better stop.” He took her hands and kissed them. “I want you so much I hurt, Hildie.” He rested his forehead against hers. “I know what I’d like to do with you right now, but I don’t want to shock the life out of my parents.”

Mom prepared a wonderful lunch. They all sat around the table, giving thanks to God for Trip’s safe return. Trip fed Charlie. “They say food is the quickest way to a man’s heart.” Trip made airplane sounds and told Charlie to open the hangar. Everyone laughed. Hildie couldn’t take her eyes off Trip.

Dad got up. “Why don’t we take this little fellow on a stroll,

Mom?"

Mom stacked dishes and put them in the sink. "The fresh air would do him good. Leave the dishes, Hildie. You and Trip have a lot of catching up to do."

They went out with the stroller they'd bought before Hildie arrived and settled Charlie into it. The sun was warm as Trip and his dad carried the stroller down the front steps, Mom following.

"We're going down and around Prospect Lake," Dad called out. "Charlie might like to watch the kids playing."

"The Harts haven't seen him yet," Mom called. "We'll probably stop there while we're out."

"Don't you two worry if we're gone for a couple of hours." Dad winked at Trip. "We'll take care of Charlie. You take care of your wife."

Hildie watched them walk up East Moreno Avenue. Trip took her hand and drew her back inside the house, closing the door behind them. Leaning against it, he grinned. "A couple of hours, Dad said."

She blushed. "I adore your parents."

They made the most of the rest of the afternoon.

* * *

Hildie had six perfect days with Trip before he had to report to base. His parents went with her to the train station. Mom took Charlie so Hildie could walk alongside the moving car, her hand pressed against the glass, his on the other side. "I'll see you in a few days, Trip."

His eyes filled with tears. He mouthed, *I love you.* He looked over her head to his parents and then turned away.

No one spoke on the way back to the house. Hildemara had a premonition, but didn't want to speak it. Mom reached for Charlie as soon as they entered the house. "Why don't you let me take him for a while?" She looked ready to cry. She took Charlie into the bedroom instead of setting him on the rug to play. Hildie's heart began to pound.

"Sit down, honey." Dad put his hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"Trip couldn't tell you."

She started to shake inside as the fear came up and spread. She had read the papers. She hadn't wanted to believe it. "Tell me what?" She could barely get the words out. The war in Europe had ended. Trip had done his part.

"Trip received his orders. He's being sent to the South Pacific."

* * *

Grief-stricken and angry, Hildemara returned to Murietta. Mom and Dad had wanted her to stay with them in Colorado Springs, but she said Bernie and Elizabeth could use her help holding on to the Musashi place. Dad's eyes had flickered at the Japanese name, but he hadn't argued.

Settled again, Hildie couldn't bear to read the newspapers or listen to the radio. At night, Bernie turned it on and she couldn't get away from it. Casualties mounted as ships were sunk by kamikaze pilots. Each island recaptured cost tens of thousands of lives. And still, Japan with its ancient code of honor refused to surrender. An invasion would come, and estimates ran up to a hundred thousand American soldiers dead to defeat the Japanese on their own soil. How many had already been killed at Normandy or in northern Africa, Italy, and Germany? Millions! Europe had been laid waste by war.

Trip wrote.

*Rough seas. Been sick for days. Not much good to anyone.*

And how long before his ship reached the shores of Japan and he would be in another beach invasion, the red cross on his white helmet a perfect target for enemy fire?

Mama told her worrying did no good, but Hildie couldn't seem to stop. She worried over Trip's ship being hit by a kamikaze. She worried about his ship sinking, leaving him lost at sea, adrift, then drowning or being eaten by sharks. She worried his ship would succeed in reaching Japan or some godforsaken island and he'd step on a land mine and be blasted to bits like poor Eddie Rinckel and a dozen others she knew from school days.

"You're going to make yourself sick again, Hildemara Rose." Mama sat at the Musashis' table, a glass of lemonade in front of her. "You can't change anything. Your husband will come back or he won't. Worrying isn't going to help him. You've got to stop moping around like a lost soul, hiding in the house. Elizabeth could use a little more help around here, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Leave me alone, Mama. What do you know about loving someone the way I love Trip?" She regretted the words as soon as they sprang from her mouth.

"Oh. Love. Is that what this is? Love?" Mama sneered. "Looks more like self-pity from where I'm sitting. And a good excuse not to carry your share of the load. Who do you think you are, some

duchess? Leaving all the work to Bernie and Elizabeth because your husband made it back from Europe and got sent to the Pacific? You think you're alone in your misery? Trip would be proud of you, wouldn't he? Seeing you sitting on your backside at the breakfast table sniveling and letting Elizabeth keep watch over two babies. No. Make that three. Wouldn't he just love that?"

*"Stop it!"*

Mama got up and shattered the glass of lemonade in the sink. "No. You stop it! *Mein Gott!* This is war! The people who give up and give in don't survive! You know what Papa said about worry. It's sin, Hildemara! It shows your lack of faith in God! You know what Papa told me before he died? He said every time I felt myself starting to worry, he wanted me to pray. *Pray!* That's what I do! Sometimes screaming! I hang on to faith with both fists and pray. It's harder some days than others, but by heavens, I do it!"

"I'm not you."

"No. You're not." Mama let out her breath. "I didn't expect you to turn out like me. I just didn't want to you to be like . . ."

Caught by the changed tone of her voice, Hildemara looked up. "Like who?"

"Never mind." She shook her head, her eyes moist. "Sometimes all you can do is pray." She looked down at Hildemara. "And hope for the best." She went to the door. "Tell Elizabeth I'm sorry about the glass. I'll get her another." She slammed the door behind herself.

Hildemara picked the glass shards out of the sink and threw them away. Putting on her apron, she went out to help Elizabeth weed the garden. She could hear Eddie and Charlie playing in the pen Bernie had set up. Elizabeth glanced up and shaded her eyes. "I saw Mama going in to talk with you. Are you okay?"

"I'll survive." She leaned down and ran her hand over Charlie's head. Whatever happened, she knew for his sake she had to do more than survive.

* * *

On August 6, 1945, America dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Hildie sat with Bernie and Elizabeth listening to the radio. They had heard rumors something big was coming, but had never imagined such destruction possible. "They'll surrender now." Bernie felt sure of it.

The Japanese didn't.

Another bomb fell three days later on Nagasaki after leaflets had

been dropped to warn of its coming. Bernie cheered when the Japanese surrendered, as did Hildemara and Elizabeth, dancing around the kitchen while Eddie and Charlie watched with wide eyes, confused at all the ruckus.

Two days later, the Western Defense Command revoked the exclusion orders against Japanese Americans. The Musashis would be coming home soon, but Bernie didn't seem at all worried about it. He and Elizabeth started making plans to move farther north, closer to Sacramento.

Hildemara received a letter from Trip. His ship would come into San Francisco. He didn't know what day.

*Stay in Murietta. I'll come to you. . . .*

Would he want to go back to Colorado or stay in California? Would he want to start medical school right away? If so, she would have to find a job and help pay his way. But then what would she do about Charles? So many decisions needed to be made. She wouldn't know anything until Trip came home.

When the phone rang, she ran to catch it.

"Do you know there are no taxis in Murietta?"

"Trip!"

"At least, none that I can find. How's a civilian supposed to get a ride around here?"

"Where are you?" She sobbed with joy.

"Murietta train station."

"We'll be right there!" She ran outside. *"Bernie!"* For the first time in her life, she wished she had taken Mama's advice and learned to drive.

On the way to town, Hildemara screamed, "Can't you go any faster?"

Bernie chuckled. "If I go any faster, we'll end up in a ditch." His eyes gleamed with amusement. "I'm surprised you didn't want to bring Charlie with you."

"Oh no!" she shrieked. She'd left him alone on the rug! "We've got to go back!"

"Forgot him, huh?" Bernie laughed without restraint. "Just left him with the door wide open. He's probably toddled off someplace. Probably eating sand by now or playing in manure. He could fall into a canal, you know, or get run over. Great mama you turned out to be."

*"Bernie!"*

He gave her a shove. “He’s fine, you idiot. Relax! Elizabeth took him out to the garden. He and Eddie are probably yanking on the playpen bars trying to escape. Did you know you forgot to hang up the telephone? You just left poor Trip hanging on a line.”

“What am I going to tell Trip? What’s he going to think of me?”

Bernie laughed. “I doubt he’ll be thinking about anything but getting his hands on his wife again.”

Trip didn’t give her a chance to breathe, let alone explain why she didn’t have Charlie with her. She laughed and cried she was so happy to see him. He looked lean and fit, and handsome in his uniform, though she couldn’t wait to see him out of it. “You said *civilian*.”

“I am, but you have all my civvies in the trunk.”

“Oh. I forgot.”

Bernie grinned. “She seems to be forgetting a lot of things lately.”

Mama came over to welcome Trip home. She had gone to town and bought a leg of lamb and wanted to help put on a celebratory dinner. Hildie ran out to the barn and brought back a tablecloth and china place settings. Bernie and Trip took their sons outside to play while Mama, Hildie, and Elizabeth set the table.

Mama admired the plates. “Lady Daisy had plates just like these.” She ran her finger around the edge of a Royal Doulton plate before setting it on the table.

The Martins came over. The house filled up to bursting. Everyone laughed and talked and passed plates of lamb, mashed potatoes, carrots, and peas around the table. Mama had even thought of apple mint jelly. Trip chopped carrots for Charles, who chucked them on the floor, rousing more laughter. “We’re going to have to work on your table manners.”

They talked of more serious matters. Trip asked what Bernie planned to do when the Musashis came home.

“Start packing.”

Everyone grew quiet. Hitch and Donna exchanged a glance. Mama spoke up. “Hitch, you and Donna needn’t worry. We have a contract.”

“We never signed anything, Marta. And Bernie’s your son. . . .”

“I gave my word.”

Hitch looked embarrassed. “Bernie and Elizabeth and the baby will need a place to live. What’re they going to do?”

Mama smiled. “Ask them.”

Bernie took Elizabeth's hand. "We've been talking about moving up to Sacramento and opening a nursery. I've got some money saved—not much, but enough to get started." He gave Mama an apologetic smile. "It's what I've always wanted to do."

Mama stared back. "Did I ever say you couldn't?" She turned to Trip. "What about you two? Where will you go?"

Trip looked grim. "We can go back to Colorado Springs for a while, until I figure out what I'm going to do with the rest of my life."

Hildie was surprised. "What about medical school?"

"Normandy killed that plan for me. I've seen all the blood I ever want to see. No more." He shook his head. "I don't think I could ever work in a hospital again either."

Mama picked up a bowl of mashed potatoes and handed them to Donna. "It'll all work out." She looked at Hildemara. "Don't worry about it."

## Hoofstuk 41

## 1945

Franklin Roosevelt begin met sy vierde termyn as president, met Henry Truman as die nuwe visepresident. Londen word gebombardeer. Mamma skryf aan 'n vriendin in Kew Gardens. Gerugte word bevestig dat Jode in Nazi-konsentrasiekampe uitgemoor word. Duitse offisiere faal in 'n poging om Hitler te vermoor en word gehang. Amerikaanse soldate marsjeer in die rigting van Berlyn.

Uiteindelik moet Duitsland oorgee, maar die oorlog teen Japan woed voort. Duisende Amerikaners sterf in die stryd om die Pasifiese eilande een vir een terug te neem.

Trip skryf uit Berlyn.

*Ek kom huis toe.*

Hy weet nie wanneer hy gaan terug wees nie, maar hy sal gestuur word na die stad waar hy gewerf is. Dit beteken dat as sy hom op die stasie wil inwag, sy na Colorado toe moet gaan. Hildie se vreugde verander in paniek toe sy sien dat die brief twaalf dae gelede gestuur is.

Bernie neem haar stasie toe om kaartjies te koop. Sy bid dat sy in 'n slaapwa plek kry sodat sy en die tweejarige Charlie gedurende die drie dae lange reis na Colorado kan rus.

Hildie sukkel met rysiekte en teen die tyd dat hulle daar aankom, het sy gewig verloor en is sy doodmoeg. Dis middag toe die trein in Denver arriveer en sy op die Eagle-stoomskip na Colorado Springs oorklim. Dis 'n gespook met haar tas en Charles op haar heup, maar sy maak dit net betyds. Elke spier in haar lyf pyn. Sy skuif Charles na haar ander heup.

In Colorado Springs staan Ma en Pa Arundel op die platform vir haar en wag. Hildemara huil van verligting toe sy hulle sien. Ma gee haar 'n vinnige drukkie en neem Charlie. "Ag, hy's pragtig! Net soos sy pappa op hierdie ouderdom." Sy soen Charlie op sy vet wangetjies

terwyl Pa vir Hildemara ’n drukkie gee.

“Het julle al iets gehoor?” Hildie het gedroom dat Trip by hulle sou wees.

“Nog nie, maar hy gaan nou enige dag by die huis wees.” Pa tel die tas op. “Net een?”

“Bernie sal alles verskeep sodra ons weet waar ons gaan bly.”

Sy voel dood op haar voete. Toe sy struikel, is Pa net betyds by haar elmboog en hy kyk besorg na haar. “Jy gaan reguit bed toe wanneer ons by die huis kom. Dit lyk asof jy drie dae laas geslaap het.”

“Charlie het nie veel op die trein geslaap nie.”

Pa glimlag. “Nou ja, nou het jy versterkings en kan jy ’n bietjie uitrus voordat Trip hier is.”

Hildie slaap die oomblik toe haar kop Trip se kussing in die stoepkamer raak. Sy word wakker toe iemand oor haar gesig streel. Toe sy haar oë oopmaak, sien sy Trip bokant haar, ’n glimlag op sy gesig. Dis eers toe hy praat dat sy besef dis nie ’n droom nie.

“Haai, slaapkous.”

Sy lig haar hand en raak aan sy gesig. Dan gooi sy haar arms met ’n snik om sy nek. Hy hou haar vas. Later strengel hy sy vingers deur haar hare en trek haar kop agteroor om haar te soen. Sy proe sout en besef dat hulle albei huil.

Hy fluister verleë teen haar hare. “Ek het so na jou verlang, Hildie.” Sy hoor die trane in sy stem.

Sy nestel nader aan hom en druk haar gesig in sy nek om sy reuk in te asem. “Jy is terug. Dank die Here, jy’s terug.” Sy kan die bewing in sy hande voel. As dit nie vir sy ouers in die ander vertrek of vir Charlie was wat weer begin huil het nie, sou sy dalk meer vrymoedigheid gehad het. Sy trek haar kop weg en glimlag terwyl sy haar man se gelaatstrekke indrink. Hy lyk moeg. Sy gesig het nie verander nie, maar sy oë lyk ouer, oorlogsmoeg. “Wat dink jy van jou seun?”

“Hy’s volmaak. Hy is op die kombuismat besig om met Ma se houtlepels te speel. Of hy was. Ek het hom probeer optel, maar hy het nie van die idee gehou nie.”

“Hy ken jou nog nie. Hy sal nog.” Sy bly aan hom raak, oor hom streel. Haar hart krimp by die aanskoue van sy uitputting, hartseer, vreugde, alles deurmekaar. Sy oë verdonker.

“Jy moet liewer ophou.” Hy neem haar hande en soen hulle. “Ek wil jou so graag hê dat dit seermaak, Hildie.” Hy rus met sy voorkop teen hare. “Ek weet wat ek nou met jou wil maak, maar ek wil nie my

ouers die skok van hulle lewe gee nie."

Ma het 'n wonderlike ete voorberei. Hulle sit aan tafel en dank God vir Trip se veilige terugkeer. Trip voer vir Charlie. "Hulle sê kos is die kortste pad na 'n man se hart." Trip maak vliegtuiggeluide en sê Charlie moet die loods oopmaak. Almal lag. Hildie kan haar oë nie van Trip wegskeur nie.

Pa staan op. "Hoekom gaan loop ons nie 'n entjie met die kleinman nie, Ma?"

Ma maak die borde bymekaar en gaan sit hulle in die wasbak. "Die vars lug sal hom goed doen. Los die skottelgoed, Hildie. Jy en Trip het baie om in te haal."

Hulle gaan haal die stootwaentjie wat hulle voor Hildie se aankoms gekoop het en maak seker dat Charlie gemaklik is. Die son is warm toe Trip en sy pa die waentjie by die voorste trappe afdra. Ma volg op hulle hakke.

"Ons het gedink om 'n bietjie by die meer te gaan uitspan," roep Pa terug. "Charlie sal daarvan hou om die kinders te sien speel."

"Die Harts het hom nog nie gesien nie," roep Ma. "Ons sal waarskynlik daar gaan inloer terwyl ons uit is."

"Moenie bekommerd wees as ons dalk 'n paar uur weg is nie." Pa knipoog vir Trip. "Ons sal na Charlie kyk. Kyk jy na jou vrou."

Hildie kyk hoe hulle wegstap. Trip neem haar hand en trek haar saam met hom die huis binne. Nadat hy die deur toegemaak het, leun hy daarteen en grinnik. "'n Paar uur, het Pa gesê."

Sy bloos. "Jy het wonderlike ouers."

Hulle maak die meeste van hulle middag saam.

***

Hildie het ses volmaakte dae saam met Trip voordat hy by sy basis moet gaan aanmeld. Sy ouers gaan saam met haar stasie toe. Ma neem Charlie sodat Hildie langs die bewegende wa kan loop, haar en Trip se hande aan weerskante van die glas. "Ek sien jou oor 'n paar dae, Trip."

Sy oë is vol trane. Met sy mond vorm hy die woorde: *Ek's lief vir jou*. Hy kyk oor haar kop na sy ouers en dan draai hy weg.

Niemand praat op pad terug huis toe nie. Hildemara het 'n voorbode, maar sy wil dit nie sê nie. Ma neem Charlie by haar toe hulle by die huis kom. "Gee dat ek hom 'n rukkie neem." Dit lyk of sy

gaan huil. Pleks van Charlie op die mat te laat speel, neem sy hom kamer toe. Hildie se hart begin swaar klop.

"Kom sit, my skat." Pa plaas sy hand op haar skouer.

"Wat is fout?"

"Trip kon dit nie vir jou sê nie."

Sy begin bewe toe die vrees uit haar hart opklim en versprei. Sy het die koerante gelees. Sy wou dit nie glo nie. "Wat kon hy nie vir my sê nie?" Sy sukkel om die woorde uit te kry. Die oorlog in Europa is verby. Trip het sy deel gedoen.

"Trip het 'n nuwe opdrag ontvang. Hy word na die Stille Suidsee uitgeplaas."

***

Hildemara is hartseer en kwaad toe sy na Murietta toe teruggaan. Ma en Pa wou hê dat sy by hulle in Colorado Springs moes bly, maar sy het gesê Bernie en Elizabeth het haar hulp nodig om die Musashi-plek in stand te hou. By die aanhoor van die Japannese naam was daar 'n flikkering in Pa se oë, maar hy het nie gestry nie.

Terug op die plaas kan Hildie dit nie hanteer om koerant te lees of radio te luister nie. Saans skakel Bernie dit aan en dan kan sy nie daarvan wegkom nie. Sterftes neem toe namate skepe deur Kamikaze-vlieëniers gesink word. Vir elke eiland wat teruggeneem word, bly tienduisende lewens in die slag. En steeds weier die Japannese met hulle antieke erekode om oor te gee. Dis net 'n kwessie van tyd voordat daar 'n inval gaan wees. En daar word beraam dat honderde duisende Amerikaanse soldate sal sterf ten einde die Japannese op hulle eie grondgebied te verslaan. Hoeveel het nie alreeds by Normandië en in Noord-Afrika, Italië en Duitsland gesneuwel nie? Miljoene! Die oorlog het Europa in puin gelê.

Trip skryf.

*Wilde see. Dae lank seesiek. Nie veel werd vir enigiemand nie.*

Hoe lank voordat sy skip die Japannese kus bereik en hy in nog 'n strand-inval betrokke sal wees, die rooi kruis op sy wit helm die ideale teiken vir vyandige skutters?

Mamma sê dit help nie om haar te bekommer nie, maar Hildie kan nie ophou nie. Sy is bekommerd dat Trip deur 'n kamikaze getref word. Sy is bekommerd dat sy skip sink en hy uiteindelik verdrink of deur haaie opgevreet word. Sy bekommer haar dat sy skip Japan of

een of ander godverlate eiland sal bereik en hy op ’n landmyn trap en opgeblaas sal word soos arme Eddie Rinckel en dosyne ander wat sy uit haar kleintyd ken.

“Jy gaan jouself weer siek maak, Hildemara Rose.” Mamma sit by die Musashi’s se tafel, ’n glas limonade voor haar. “Jy kan niks verander nie. Jou man gaan óf terugkom óf nie. Om jou te bekommer gaan hom nie help nie. Hou op om jou soos ’n verlore siel te verknies en in die huis weg te kruip. Elizabeth kan doen met ’n bietjie meer hulp, vir ingeval jy dit nie agterkom nie.”

“Los my uit, Mamma. Ma weet nie hoe dit is om vir iemand lief te wees soos wat ek vir Trip is nie.” Sy berou die woorde die oomblik toe hulle uit haar mond is.

“O. Liefde. Is dit wat dit is? Liefde?” Mamma smaal. “Van waar ek sit, lyk dit meer soos selfbejammering. En ’n handige verskoning om nie jou deel te doen nie. Wie dink jy is jy, een of ander gravin? Bernie en Elizabeth kan maar al die werk doen omdat jou man dit uit Europa gemaak het en na die Stille Suidsee gestuur is. Dink jy jy is alleen in jou ellende? Dink net hoe trots Trip op jou sou wees. Om jou hier by die kombuistafel te sien sit en snuif terwyl Elizabeth twee babas moet oppas. Nee. Maak dit drie. Ek is seker dit sal hom baie bly maak.”

“*Hou op!*”

Mamma staan op en gooi die glas limonade aan skerwe in die wasbak. “Nee. Jý moet ophou. *Mein Gott*! Dit is oorlog! Mense wat opgee en ingee, maak dit nie! Jy weet wat Pappa oor bekommernis gesê het. Dit is sonde, Hildemara! Dit bewys jou gebrek aan geloof in God! Weet jy wat het Pappa voor sy dood vir my gesê? Dat ek elke keer wanneer ek bekommerd raak, moet bid. *Bid*! Dit is wat ek doen! Somtyds al skreeuende! Ek klou met albei my hande vas aan wat ek glo en bid. Party dae is dit moeiliker as ander, maar ek byt vas en ek bid!”

“Ek is nie Mamma nie.”

“Nee. Jy’s nie.” Mamma laat haar asem uit. “Ek het nie verwag dat jy soos ek sou wees nie. Ek wou net nie hê jy moet soos – ”

Die verandering in Mamma se stem laat Hildemara opkyk. “Soos wie?”

“Maak nie saak nie.” Sy skud haar kop, haar oë blink. “Al wat ons kan doen, is bid.” Sy kyk af na Hildemara. “En hoop vir die beste.” Sy gaan na die deur toe. “Sê vir Elizabeth ek’s jammer oor die glas. Ek sal vir haar ’n ander een kry.” Sy slaan die deur agter haar toe.

Hildemara tel die glasstukke op en gooi hulle weg. Dan maak sy

haar voorskoot vas en gaan help Elizabeth in die tuin. Sy hoor Eddie en Charlie in die speelkampie wat Bernie vir hulle gebou het. Elizabeth kyk op en skerm haar oë teen die son. "Ek het gesien Mamma gaan in om met jou te praat. Is alles reg?"

"Ek sal oorleef." Sy buk en streel oor Charlie se kop. Wat ook al gebeur, vir Charlie sal sy meer moet doen as om te oorleef.

***

Op 6 Augustus 1945 laat val Amerika die atoombom op Hirosjima. Hildie sit saam met Bernie en Elizabeth voor die radio. Daar was gerugte dat iets groots sou gebeur, maar hulle het nooit gedink sulke verwoesting is moontlik nie. "Hulle sal nou oorgee." Bernie is seker daarvan.

Nie die Japannese nie.

Drie dae later val daar nog 'n bom in Nagasaki nadat pamflette uit die lug gestrooi is om die mense te waarsku. Bernie juig toe die Japannese oorgee. Hy en Hildemara en Elizabeth dans in die kombuis terwyl Eddie en Charlie met groot oë sit en kyk, verward oor die skielike kabaal.

Twee dae later word die uitsluitingsbevele teen Japannese Amerikaners herroep. Die Musashi's sal binnekort terugkom, maar dit lyk glad nie of dit Bernie pla nie. Hy en Elizabeth begin planne maak om hulle verder noord, nader aan Sacramento te gaan vestig.

Hildemara ontvang 'n brief van Trip. Sy skip sal in San Francisco vasmeer. Hy weet nie wanneer nie.

*Bly in Murietta. Ek sal na jou toe kom ...*

Sal hy na Colorado toe wil gaan of in Kalifornië bly? Sal hy dadelik met sy mediese studies wil begin? Indien wel, sal sy moet werk om vir sy studies te betaal. Maar wat moet sy dan met Charles doen? Daar is soveel besluite wat geneem moet word, en sy sal niks weet voordat Trip terug is nie.

Toe die foon lui, hardloop sy en tel op.

"Weet jy dat daar nie taxi's in Murietta is nie?"

"Trip!"

"Altans, nie sover ek kan sien nie. Hoe is 'n burgerlike veronderstel om van A na B te kom?"

"Waar is jy?" Sy snik van blydskap.

"Op die stasie in Murietta."

"Ons is nou daar!" Sy hardloop buitentoe. "*Bernie!*" Vir die eerste keer in haar lewe wens sy sy het Mamma se raad gevolg en leer bestuur.

Op pad dorp toe gil Hildemara: "Kan jy nie vinniger ry nie?"

Bernie lag. "As ek nog vinniger ry, beland ons in 'n sloot." Sy oë blink van die pret. "Ek's verbaas dat jy Charlie nie wou saambring nie."

"Nee!" gil sy. Sy het hom alleen op die mat gelos! "Ons moet teruggaan!"

"Hom vergeet, hè?" Bernie lag onbevange. "Sommer so met die oop deur. Hy het seker iewers heen koers gekry. Sit dalk en eet sand of speel in die mis. Hy kan in die kanaal val, jy weet, of omgery word. Wonderlike mamma, jy."

"*Bernie!*"

Hy gee haar 'n stamp. "Hy makeer niks nie, domkop. Ontspan! Elizabeth het hom uitgeneem. Hy en Eddie is seker in die speelkampie besig om uit te werk hoe hulle gaan ontsnap. Weet jy dat jy vergeet het om die telefoon neer te sit. Arme Trip!"

"Wat gaan ek vir Trip sê? Wat gaan hy van my dink?"

Bernie lag. "Ek twyfel of hy aan enigiets anders gaan dink as om sy vrou weer in sy arms te hê."

Trip gee haar nie kans om asem te haal nie, laat staan nog te verduidelik waarom sy nie vir Charlie by haar het nie. Sy lag en huil, so bly is sy om hom te sien. Hy lyk lenig en fiks en aantreklik in sy uniform, al kan sy nie wag om hom in iets anders te sien nie. "Jy het *burgerlike* gesê."

"Ek is, maar jy het al my gewone klere in die trommel."

"O. Ek het vergeet."

Bernie grinnik. "Sy vergeet deesdae nogal baie."

Mamma kom oor om Trip terug te verwelkom. Sy het 'n skaapboud op die dorp gekoop en bied aan om met die feesmaal te help. Hildie hardloop uit en bring 'n tafeldoek en breekware. Bernie en Trip vat die seuns om buite te gaan speel terwyl Mamma, Hildie en Elizabeth die tafel dek.

Mamma bewonder die borde. "Lady Daisy het net sulke borde gehad." Sy streel met haar vinger oor die rand van 'n Royal Doulton-bord voordat sy dit op die tafel neersit.

Die Martins kom kuier. Die huis is later stampvol. Almal lag en gesels en opskepborde met lam, kapokaartappels, wortels en ertjies word oor en weer aangegee. Mamma het selfs aan mintjellie gedink.

Trip sny wortels vir Charles en dié gooi hulle op die vloer. "Ons sal aan jou tafelmaniere moet werk."

Later praat hulle ernstiger sake. Trip vra wat Bernie gaan doen wanneer die Musashi's huis toe kom.

"Begin pak."

Almal word stil. Hitch en Donna kyk na mekaar. Mamma praat. "Hitch, jy en Donna moenie bekommerd wees nie. Ons het 'n kontrak."

"Ons het nooit iets geteken nie, Marta. En Bernie is jou seun ... "

"Ek het julle my woord gegee."

Hitch lyk verleë. "Bernie en Elizabeth en die baba gaan 'n plek nodig hê om te bly. Wat gaan hulle doen?"

Mamma glimlag. "Vra hulle."

Bernie neem Elizabeth se hand. "Ons het daaraan gedink om Sacramento toe te gaan en 'n kwekery oop te maak. Ek het 'n bietjie spaargeld – nie veel nie, maar genoeg vir 'n begin." Hy glimlag verskonend vir Mamma. "Dis wat ek nog altyd wou doen."

Mamma beantwoord sy blik. "Het ek ooit gesê jy mag nie?" Sy draai na Trip. "Wat van julle twee? Waarnatoe sal julle gaan?"

Trip lyk stroef. "Ons kan vir 'n rukkie na Colorado Springs toe gaan, totdat ek uitpluis wat ek met die res van my lewe wil doen."

Hildie is verras. "Wat van medies?"

"Normandië het daardie plan vir my doodgemaak. Ek het genoeg bloed gesien om my 'n leeftyd te hou. Ek het genoeg gehad." Hy skud sy kop. "Ek dink ook nie ek sal ooit weer in 'n hospitaal wil werk nie."

Mamma neem die bak kapokaartappels en gee dit vir Donna. "Dit sal alles uitwerk." Sy kyk na Hildemara. "Moenie daaroor bekommerd wees nie."

## Chapter 42

Friday afternoon, Hildemara heard a heavy vehicle coming up the road. She straightened where she had been working in a row of zucchini and brushed herself off. An Army bus pulled up and idled in front of the farm. Hildie swung Charlie up and sat him on her hip as she hurried toward the yard.

Mr. Musashi got off the bus, Mrs. Musashi behind him. George and the girls, all taller, stepped down, looking shy and uncertain. Bernie came out of the barn. Elizabeth opened the screen door and came outside. As the bus pulled away, Mama crossed the street.

The Musashis just stood there, tight together, silent, looking from house to barn to orchard and fields. They looked strange in their government-issued clothing. Hildie felt tears fill her eyes. No one seemed to know what to do, what to say. Bernie approached them. "Everything is pretty much the way you left it, Mr. Musashi."

They just looked at him, saying nothing. Hildemara couldn't read anything in their faces. They had never seemed more foreign or more vulnerable.

Bernie looked back at Elizabeth. Hildie handed Charlie to Trip and went to Betsy. She was a beautiful young woman now, a head taller than she had been the last time Hildie saw her. "Let's bring your parents inside the house, Betsy. You all must be tired. We can make tea. Elizabeth has been baking cookies all morning."

"You live here now, too?" Betsy looked at her coldly.

Mama stepped in and spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Musashi. "Only until you all got back." She spoke firmly. "Bernhard moved into your place right after the government relocated you. He worked both sides of the road until I hired the Martins to sharecrop my place. Otherwise, my son would have worked himself to death keeping both places running. My son has done a good job for you, Mr. Musashi. Tell him, Bernhard!"

Bernie blushed crimson. "Mama . . ."

"Can't you see? They don't understand! They think you stole their place." She turned to Betsy. "Explain to your parents right now. The mortgage and taxes are paid up, and there's enough left from last year's crops to carry your family through to next year. We've been waiting for you. It's still your place."

Betsy started to cry. She bowed deeply, her hands fluttering over her mouth. Her father looked at her and spoke grimly. She shook her

head and spoke in Japanese. He looked at Bernhard and Mama. He looked at Elizabeth and Hildemara and Trip. He didn't say anything. Mrs. Musashi spoke quietly in Japanese. Betsy answered. Tears streamed down Mrs. Musashi's face. Mr. Musashi bowed at the waist, and so did his wife and children.

Mama looked mortified. "What about your brothers, Betsy?" No one else had the courage to ask. "When will they be home?"

Betsy smiled, dark eyes shining, but it was Mr. Musashi who answered. "They both good soldiers, many honors from fighting Germans." He caught himself. "So sorry, Mrs. Waltert. So sorry. I not think clearly."

"No need to apologize, Mr. Musashi. I'm Swiss, not German, and Niclas believed Hitler would cause more trouble than the kaiser. He would've been proud of your sons."

* * *

Hildie and Trip moved back to Oakland. They stayed in a hotel until they found a small rental house on Quigley Street. Charlie still struggled with having to share Hildie with Trip. He'd become used to sleeping with Hildemara and having her all to himself. Now that he didn't, he threw tantrums when put in his own room. Torn between husband and son, Hildie tried to please both. Still, when Charlie cried, she jumped to comfort him. Nights proved long with numerous interruptions. Trip became frustrated. "He knows exactly when to ruin things, doesn't he?"

By the end of his first month home, Trip had had enough. When Charlie wailed, he caught hold of Hildie and held her down in bed. "Let him cry."

"He needs me."

"The heck he does. You're making it worse. He has to learn he can't have you any time he wants."

"He doesn't understand!"

"He understands all right. All he has to do is cry to have his way."

"That's not fair. He's just a baby."

"He's *our* son, Hildie. He's not just yours anymore. I'm his father. Listen to me."

Charlie's cries turned to screams of rage. Hildie started to cry. She wanted to cover her ears or scream along with him.

"Don't give in." Trip held her close, his arm across her chest, his leg trapping hers.

“Let me go, Trip.”

With a sigh, he did and turned his back on her.

Hildie sat on the edge of the bed, head in her hands, heart in her throat. Charlie’s screams changed. He cried and then stopped, as though listening for her footsteps in the hall. He cried again. “Mama . . . Mama . . .”

He whimpered. Then silence fell in the house. She curled on her side. Trip didn’t touch her for the rest of the night. She felt the wall between them, like a physical force.

* * *

Charlie wasn’t the only one having difficulties adjusting.

Trip had constant nightmares. He moaned, thrashed, cried out. When Hildie touched his shoulder, wanting to soothe him, he jerked awake. He always came out of it with a jolt, shaking. He wouldn’t talk about what he dreamed. Sometimes he got up and went into the living room and sat with a light on, staring at nothing.

She came out and sat with him. “What do you dream about?” Maybe talking about it would break the grip the nightmares had on him.

“The war.”

“Can you tell me . . . ?”

“No!” He looked bleak and despairing.

Once, she came out and found him crying, his hands raked into his hair, holding his head. She sat down beside him and put her hand on his back. He stood abruptly and moved away from her. “Go back to bed, Hildemara.”

“I love you.”

“I know. I love you, too. But it doesn’t help.”

“If you can’t talk to me about what happened, you have to talk to someone.”

“I’ll get over it in time.”

* * *

The nightmares persisted. Trip entered the police academy and that seemed to make everything worse, though he felt called to it. A siren’s call that would destroy him? Sometimes he drank in order to sleep.

Finally Hildie could stand the worry no more. It affected her sleep and appetite. She went to Rev. Mathias.

Sobbing, she told him everything, even how sometimes when they made love, Trip seemed to be trying to drive demons away. “He

scares me sometimes. I don't know what to do to help him. He won't let me in." When asked, Hildemara could name all the places to which she had posted letters. Rev. Mathias thought about it for a moment, his mouth a grim line.

"We must have been following in each other's footsteps. Normandy. Paris. Germany. Berlin. I can guess what he saw, Hildemara. I saw it, too. I was a chaplain."

When Rev. Mathias came to dinner, Trip looked at her with fury in his eyes, but didn't say anything embarrassing about a wife interfering. Hildemara took Charlie and went out for a long walk so the men could talk. When she came back, both of them had red-rimmed eyes. After they saw Rev. Mathias out, Trip kissed her the way he used to kiss her. Hildie didn't ask what they had talked about. She didn't want to know any more details than she already did.

That night her husband slept through the night without crying out or thrashing. She awakened once and found him so still, she feared he had died. She turned on the light and found his face at peace. He looked young again, as he had before he'd gone away to war. In the morning, he looked rested, but she knew the war had altered him in ways that would never be undone.

He and Rev. Mathias started meeting once a week for coffee just to talk. Even so, there were times when Hildie would see a look come into Trip's eyes, and she'd know he was reliving the horrors again. Some wounds broke open and had to be stitched closed with patience and prayer. She mourned the loss of the young man he had been—carefree, easygoing Trip so quick to laughter. That man had disappeared on the beaches at Normandy, and in his place another returned hardened by war, cynical about the world, and with a fierce desire to protect her and Charlie from harm.

Trip excelled at the police academy. His college degree and science background made him a prime candidate for forensics. He agreed to a transfer to the new Santa Rita jail, where he would work in a laboratory, studying and sorting evidence.

Rather than be separated by the long commute, Hildie looked for a rental near the prison. They moved into a bigger house with a bigger yard not far from his job. Paxtown, a small farming community nestled in the East Bay Hills, sat two miles away with a grocery store, department store, and theater, among other comforting amenities, including a church.

The cyclone fences with concertina wire at the top and guards at

the prison gate disconcerted Hildemara. Trip had seen them before. “This time they keep the bad guys in.” His cryptic comment gave Hildie her first insight into what he had seen, what had haunted his nights for so long. They never talked about those years he served.

The neighborhood women came over with cookies and casseroles and invitations to bring Charlie over to play with their sons and daughters.

Many of their husbands had served in the war, too. They talked about problems the way Mama and Papa had talked about crops, with camaraderie and hope for the future. Hildie and Trip attended block parties, barbecues, and card parties. Hildie invited women over for coffee klatches and teas. People often talked of “those dirty Japs,” and Hildemara talked about the Musashi family and Andrew and Patrick serving in Europe. Some of the women stopped inviting her to their homes.

“I wonder what they’d say if they knew my father came from Germany and my mother is Swiss.” If not for Mama’s correspondence with Rosie Brechtwald, they wouldn’t have known how the Swiss threatened to blow the main tunnel into the country if one German stood in the light at the end of it. But that didn’t stop them from making money off the war selling munitions to the Germans and transporting goods between the Third Reich and Mussolini. Rosie said it was the only way they could remain free. Mama grieved over freedom being purchased with blood money.

“Don’t tell them,” Trip ordered her. “It’s none of their business.”

Trip kept his police revolver loaded and high enough to be out of Charlie’s reach, but close enough to get to it fast. Hildie wondered if working homicides was good for him, but he seemed to relish the work of putting criminals in prison.

After looking at available land in the area, Trip became increasingly discouraged and despondent. “I’ll be retirement age before we can afford to buy property of our own!”

“We could save enough if I worked at the veterans hospital outside Livermore.”

Trip’s eyes darkened. “What about Charlie?”

“I could work a night shift now and then. See how it goes.” She didn’t tell him she suspected she was pregnant again.

## Hoofstuk 42

Daardie Vrydagmiddag hoor Hildemara ’n swaarvoertuig in die pad aankom. Sy kom orent waar sy in ’n ry vingerskorsies gewerk het en stof haarself af. ’n Weermagbus trek af en staan luierend voor die plaas. Hildie swaai Charles op haar heup toe sy haar na die plaaswerf haas.

Meneer Musashi klim uit die bus, mevrou Musashi agter hom. George en die dogters, almal ’n stukkie langer, klim uit. Hulle lyk skugter en onseker. Bernie kom uit die skuur uit. Elizabeth maak die gaasdeur oop en kom uit. Toe die bus wegtrek, kom Mamma oor die straat gestap.

Die Musashi’s staan in ’n klein groepie en kyk woordeloos van die huis na die skuur na die boord en die lande. Hulle lyk vreemd in die klere waarmee die regering hulle uitgerus het. Hildie se oë skiet vol trane. Dit is asof niemand weet wat om te sê of te doen nie. Bernie loop hulle tegemoet. “Alles is net soos u dit gelaat het, meneer Musashi.”

Hulle kyk net na hom sonder om iets te sê. Hildemara kan nie hulle gesigte lees nie. Hulle het nog nooit so vreemd of so weerloos gelyk nie.

Bernie kyk om na Elizabeth. Hildie gee Charlie vir Trip en gaan na Betsy toe. Sy is nou ’n pragtige jong vrou, ’n kop langer as toe Hildie haar laas gesien het. “Kom ons neem jou ouers in huis toe, Betsy. Julle moet doodmoeg wees. Ons kan tee maak. Elizabeth het die hele oggend koekies gebak.”

“Julle bly nou hier?” Betsy se oë is kil.

Mamma tree tussenbeide en praat met meneer en mevrou Musashi. “Net totdat julle teruggekom het.” Sy praat in ’n ferm stem. “Bernhard het by julle plek ingetrek nadat die regering julle weggeneem het. Hy het aan weerskante van die pad gewerk totdat ek die Martins aangestel het om op my plek te kom deelboer. Anders sou my seun hom doodgewerk het om albei plekke aan die gang te hou. My seun het goeie werk vir jou gedoen, meneer Musashi. Sê vir hom,

Bernhard!"

Bernie bloos bloedrooi. "Mamma ... "

"Kan jy nie sien nie? Hulle verstaan nie! Hulle dink jy het hulle plek gesteel." Sy draai na Betsy. "Verduidelik nou dadelik vir jou ouers. Die verband en belasting is betaal, en daar is genoeg oor van verlede jaar se oes om julle familie tot volgende jaar te dra. Ons het vir julle gewag. Dis nog steeds julle plek."

Betsy begin huil. Sy buig laag, haar hande bewend voor haar mond. Haar pa kyk na haar en praat in 'n grimmige stem. Sy skud haar kop en praat in Japannees. Hy kyk na Bernhard en Mamma. Hy kyk na Elizabeth en Hildemara en Trip. Hy sê niks nie. Mevrou Musashi praat sag in Japannees. Betsy antwoord. Trane stroom oor mevrou Musashi se gesig. Meneer Musashi buig laag en sy vrou en kinders volg sy voorbeeld.

Mamma lyk ongemaklik. "Wat van jou broers, Betsy?" Niemand anders het die moed gehad om te vra nie. "Wanneer gaan hulle by die huis wees?"

Betsy glimlag stralend, maar dit is meneer Musashi wat antwoord. "Hulle twee goeie soldate, baie medaljes vir oorlog teen Duitsers." Hy swyg vervaard. "So jammer, mevrou Waltert. So jammer. Ek dink nie mooi nie."

"U hoef nie verskoning te maak nie, meneer Musashi. Ek is Switsers, nie Duits nie, en Niclas het geglo dat Hitler groter moeilikheid as die *Kaiser* sou veroorsaak. Hy sou trots gewees het op julle seuns."

* * *

Hildie en Trip gaan terug Oakland toe. Hulle bly in 'n hotel totdat hulle 'n klein huurhuis in Quigleystraat kry. Charlie vind dit steeds moeilik om Hildie met Trip te deel. Hy het daaraan gewoond geraak om by Hildemara te slaap en haar net vir homself te hê. Noudat Trip daar is, kry hy uitbarstings wanneer hulle hom na sy eie kamer toe neem. In haar verskeurdheid tussen haar man en seun probeer Hildie om albei tevrede te stel. Wanneer Charlie huil, spring sy op om hom te gaan troos. Die nagte is lank met verskeie onderbrekings. Trip raak gefrustreerd. "Hy weet net wanneer om dinge te onderbreek."

Teen die einde van sy eerste maand by die huis het Trip genoeg gehad. Toe Charlie huil, keer hy Hildie en hou haar vas in die bed. "Laat hom huil."

“Hy het my nodig.”

“Twak. En jy maak dit erger. Hy moet leer dat hy jou nie enige tyd kan hê wanneer hy wil nie.”

“Hy verstaan nie!”

“Hy verstaan maar alte goed. Al wat hy hoef te doen, is huil om sy sin te kry.”

“Dis nie regverdig nie. Hy is net ’n baba.”

“Hy is óns seun, Hildie. Hy is nie meer net joune nie. Ek is sy pa. Luister na my.”

Charlie se gehuil ontaard in ’n woedende gegil. Hildie begin huil. Sy wil haar ore toedruk of saam met hom skree.

“Moenie ingee nie.” Trip hou haar styf teen hom vas en het sy been oor hare gegooi.

“Laat my gaan, Trip.”

Hy sug toe hy haar los en sy rug op haar draai.

Hildie sit op die kant van die bed, haar kop in haar hande, haar hart in haar keel. Charlie se krete verander. Hy huil en hou dan op, asof om vir haar voetstappe in die gang te wag. Dan huil hy weer. “Mamma ... Mamma ... ”

Hy kerm. Dan raak dit stil in die huis. Sy draai op haar sy. Trip raak die res van die nag nie weer aan haar nie. Sy kan die muur tussen hulle voel, soos ’n fisiese krag.

* * *

Charlie is nie die enigste een met aanpassingsprobleme nie.

Trip word deur nagmerries geteister. Hy kreun, rol onrustig rond en gil. Wanneer Hildie aan sy skouer raak om hom te troos, skrik hy wakker. Hy kom altyd met ’n ruk uit die droom. Hy wil nie praat oor wat hy gedroom het nie. Soms staan hy op en gaan sit in die woonkamer met die lig aan en staar die niet in.

Sy kom sit by hom. “Waarvan droom jy?” Dalk sal die nagmerries hulle greep op hom verloor as hy daaroor praat.

“Die oorlog.”

“Kan jy vir my vertel ... ?”

“Nee!” Hy lyk bleek en wanhopig.

Eenmaal kom sy op hom af waar hy met sy kop in sy hande sit en huil. Sy gaan sit langs hom en plaas haar hand op sy rug. Hy staan onverwags op en beweeg weg van haar. “Gaan terug bed toe,

Hildemara."

"Ek is lief vir jou."

"Ek weet. En ek vir jou. Maar dit help nie."

"As jy nie met my kan praat oor wat gebeur het nie, moet jy met iemand anders praat."

"Dit sal een of ander tyd regkom."

***

Die nagmerries gaan nie weg nie. Trip sluit by die polisie aan en dit lyk of dit alles erger maak, al voel hy daartoe geroepe. Is dit 'n lokstem wat hom uiteindelik gaan vernietig? Soms drink hy om te kan slaap.

Uiteindelik kan Hildie die kommer nie meer verduur nie. Dit beïnvloed haar slaap en eetlus. Sy gaan sien dominee Mathias.

Deur haar snikke vertel sy hom alles, selfs hoe dit voel asof Trip soms wanneer hulle intiem is, die demone probeer verdryf. "Partykeer maak hy my bang. Ek weet nie wat om te doen om hom te help nie. Hy wil my nie inlaat nie." Toe die predikant vra, noem Hildemara al die plekke waarheen sy haar briewe gepos het. Dominee Mathias dink vir 'n oomblik na, sy mond 'n strak lyn.

"Ons moes in mekaar se voetspore gevolg het. Normandië. Parys. Duitsland. Berlyn. Ek kan my indink wat hy gesien het, Hildemara. Ek het dit ook gesien. Ek was 'n kapelaan."

Toe dominee Mathias by hulle kom eet, kyk Trip kwaai na haar, maar stel haar nie in die verleentheid deur iets oor 'n inmengerige vrou te sê nie. Hildemara neem Charlie en gaan stap 'n ver ent sodat die mans kan praat. Toe sy terugkom, het hulle albei rooi oë. Nadat hulle dominee Mathias afgesien het, soen Trip haar soos wat hy haar altyd gesoen het. Hildie vra nie waaroor hulle gepraat het nie. Sy wil nie meer besonderhede hoor as wat sy alreeds het nie.

Daardie nag slaap haar man sonder om te kreun of rond te rol of te gil. Toe sy een maal wakker word, lê hy so stil dat sy bang is hy is dood. Sy skakel die lig aan en kyk na sy vredige gesig. Hy lyk weer jonk, soos voordat hy oorlog toe gegaan het. Die volgende oggend lyk hy uitgerus, maar sy weet dat die oorlog hom op maniere verander het wat nooit weer ongedaan gemaak kan word nie.

Hy en dominee Mathias ontmoet mekaar een maal 'n week vir koffie. Nietemin kom daar tye wanneer daar 'n kyk in Trip se oë

verskyn en Hildie weet dat hy die verskrikking weer herleef. Sommige wonde skeur oop en moet met geduld en gebed toegewerk word. Sy treur oor die verlies van die jong man wat hy was – die sorglose, gemoedelike Trip wat so maklik gelag het. Daardie man het op die strande van Normandië verdwyn, en die Trip wat in sy plek teruggekom het, is hard gemaak deur die oorlog, sinies oor die wêreld en het ’n vurige begeerte om haar en Charlie teen seerkry te beskerm.

Trip vaar uitstekend by die polisie-akademie. Met sy graad en wetenskaplike agtergrond is hy ’n ideale kandidaat vir forensiese werk. Hy aanvaar ’n oorplasing na die nuwe Santa Rita-gevangenis se laboratorium waar hy hoofsaaklik met bewysstukke sal werk.

Eerder as om heen en weer te ry, kyk Hildie of hulle ’n plek iewers naby die gevangenis kan huur. Hulle verhuis na ’n groter huis met ’n groter erf naby sy werk. Paxtown, ’n klein plaasgemeenskappie wat in die East Bay-heuwels genestel is, is drie kilometer daarvandaan met ’n kruidenierswinkel, afdelingswinkel, teater sowel as ander bekende geriewe, insluitend ’n kerk.

Die lemmetjiesdraadheinings met rolle doringdraad bo-op en die wagte voor die hek ontsenu Hildemara. Trip het dit al tevore gesien. “Hierdie keer hou hulle die slegte ouens binne.” Sy kriptiese opmerking gee Hildie haar eerste kykie in wat hy gesien het, wat hom vir so lank snags geteister het. Hulle praat nooit oor die oorlog nie.

Die buurt se vroue kom groet met koekies en kasserolle en uitnodigings dat sy Charlie moet bring om by hulle kinders te kom speel.

Baie van hulle mans het ook in die oorlog geveg. Hulle praat oor probleme soos Mamma en Pappa oor die plaas gepraat het, met kameraderie en hoop vir die toekoms. Hildie en Trip gaan na blokpartytjies, braaie en speletjiesaande toe. Hildie nooi die vroue vir koffie en tee. Die mense praat dikwels van “daai vuil Japannese” en Hildie praat van die Musashi’s en Andrew en Patrick wat in Europa gaan veg het. Sommige van die vroue hou op om haar na hulle huise te nooi.

“Ek wonder wat sal hulle sê as hulle weet dat my pa van Duitsland af gekom het en dat my ma Switsers is.” As dit nie vir Mamma se korrespondensie met Rosie Brechtwald was nie, sou hulle nie geweet het dat Switserland gedreig het om die hooftonnel na die land op te blaas as een Duitser in die lig aan die einde daarvan gestaan het nie. Maar dit het hulle nie daarvan weerhou om uit die oorlog geld te maak deur ammunisie aan die Duitsers te verkoop en goedere tussen

die Derde Ryk en Mussolini te vervoer nie. Rosie sê dit was die enigste manier waarop hulle hulle vryheid kon behou. Mamma treur daaroor dat vryheid met bloedgeld gekoop word.

"Moenie vir hulle sê nie," beveel Trip. "Dit het niks met hulle te doen nie."

Trip hou sy rewolwer gelaai en hoog genoeg om buite Charlie se bereik te wees, maar naby genoeg om vinnig by te kom. Hildie wonder of dit vir hom goed is om gedurig aan manslag- en moordsake te werk, maar dit maak hom skynbaar gelukkig om misdadigers toe te sluit.

Nadat hulle na beskikbare grond in die omgewing gekyk het, raak Trip toenemend moedeloos en neerslagtig. "Ek gaan eendag aftree voordat ons dit kan bekostig om ons eie eiendom te koop!"

"Ons kan genoeg spaar as ek by die veteranehospitaal buite Livermore gaan werk."

Trip se oë verdonker. "Wat van Charlie?"

"Ek kan af en toe 'n nagskof werk. Kyk hoe dit gaan." Sy vertel hom nie van haar vermoede dat sy weer swanger is nie.

## Chapter 43

**1947**

Hildie gave birth to their daughter, Carolyn, in the spring. Carolyn wasn't as easy a baby as Charlie. She had colic and cried almost constantly. Hildemara almost felt relieved when she was able to go back to work after two months off.

At first, Trip protested. "Quit, Hildie." He ran his hand over Carolyn's downy head. "Think of the baby."

"I'll sleep late on weekends. We still need to save a lot more before we can buy land."

"You're exhausted."

"LaVonne said she'd babysit Charlie and Carolyn a couple of days a week. I can change to day shifts. That will make it easier."

"And when will we be together? Dinnertime?"

"I'm only working part-time, Trip."

"And what about your health?"

"I'm fine, Trip. Really. I couldn't be better."

And it was true.

When she said it.

* * *

**1948**

Charlie, four years older, doted on his baby sister and liked to play with her. As Carolyn grew, she started climbing out of her crib at night and crawling into bed with Hildie and Trip. Hildie would have to get up and carry her back to her crib. "When is that child going to sleep through the night?"

Trip chuckled. "Maybe we should tie her in."

They locked their bedroom door instead. Sometimes Hildie got up in the morning and found Carolyn curled up with her blanket outside the door.

* * *

**1950**

"You look pale, Hildie. You've got to get more rest."

"I'm trying." Still she couldn't seem to catch up on sleep, even staying in bed on weekends.

Trip got a promotion. Now a lieutenant, he drew a higher salary. "Quit work. Stay home. We don't need you getting sick again."

She knew that better than he did. She might not make it out of

the hospital this time. Heeding Trip's appeal, Hildie resigned. She tried to get more sleep, but it seemed elusive in the face of rising fears.

As a nurse, she knew the signs, even if she'd tried to ignore them over the past months. She started losing weight again. It took a force of will to do even the easier household chores. She awakened with night sweats and fever. When the cough started, she gave up and told Trip she had to go back to Arroyo.

* * *

**1951**

Hildie had been at Arroyo two months and knew she wasn't getting any better. Lying in bed at the sanatorium, she saw all of Trip's dreams going down as her bills mounted. He had to hire a babysitter to watch Charlie and Carolyn until he got home from work each afternoon. He had to get Charlie off to school each day, cook and do the laundry, keep up the house, keep up the yard. Any time left over, he spent with her, leaving the children behind with LaVonne Haversal.

"If I'm going to die, Trip, I want to die at home."

His face twisted in agony. "Don't talk like that."

The doctor had warned them both that depression would be her greatest enemy.

"I pray, Trip. I do. I keep crying out to God to give me answers." And only one answer came again and again. It seemed a cruel joke.

Trip prayed and came up with the same solution Hildemara dreaded speaking aloud.

"She won't come."

"She's your mother. Do you think she'd do nothing to help you?"

"I told her I'd never ask for her help."

"It's the only way to bring you home, Hildie. Or are you going to let your pride stand in the way?"

"She's never helped me before. Why would she do it now, and under these circumstances?"

"We won't know unless we ask." He took her hands. "I think she'll surprise you."

Trip called Mama while Hildemara choked on her pride and wondered why God had brought her down so low. Trip thought she feared Mama might say no. Hildie feared Mama would say yes.

The moment Trip told Mama she was sick and asked for help, Hildemara knew whatever respect she had earned from her mother

would be gone. Mama would think her a coward again, too weak to stand on her own feet, incapable of being a good wife and mother.

If Mama came, Hildemara would have to lie in bed and watch her mother take over her responsibilities. And Mama would do it all better than Hildemara ever had because Mama always managed everything perfectly. Even without Papa, the ranch ran like a well-oiled machine. Mama would be the one to give Charlie wings. She'd probably teach Carolyn to read before she turned four.

Sick and helpless, Hildemara would have to watch the life she loved be taken over by her mother. Even the one thing at which she excelled, the one area of her life where she had proven her worth, would be stripped away from her.

Mama would become the nurse.

## Hoofstuk 43

### 1947

Hildie skenk in die lente geboorte aan hulle dogtertjie, Carolyn. Carolyn is nie so 'n maklike baba soos Charlie nie. Sy het koliek en huil amper permanent. Hildemara voel amper verlig toe sy ná twee maande kan teruggaan werk toe.

Aanvanklik protesteer Trip. "Bedank, Hildie." Hy streel oor Carolyn se donsige koppie. "Dink aan die baba."

"Ek sal oor naweke laat slaap. Ons sal nog baie moet spaar voordat ons kan grond koop."

"Jy is gedaan."

"LaVonne het gesê sy sal 'n paar dae 'n week na Charlie en Carolyn kyk. Ek kan begin dagskofte werk. Dit sal dinge makliker maak."

"En wanneer gaan ons mekaar sien? Etenstyd?"

"Ek werk net deeltyds, Trip."

"En wat van jou gesondheid?"

"Ek makeer niks nie, Trip. Regtig. Ek was lanklaas so gesond."

En dis die waarheid.

Op daardie tydstip.

***

### 1948

Charlie, vier jaar ouer, is versot op sy sussie en geniet dit om met haar te speel. Noudat Carolyn ouer is, begin sy uit haar bedjie klim en by Hildie en Trip in die bed kruip. Hildie moet opstaan en haar weer in haar bedjie gaan neerlê. "Wanneer gaan hierdie dogtertjie begin deurslaap?"

Trip lag. "Dalk moet ons haar aan haar bed vasmaak."

Uiteindelik besluit hulle om hulle kamerdeur te sluit. Wanneer

Hildie soggens opstaan, kry sy soms vir Carolyn met haar kombersie voor hulle deur opgekrul.

***

## 1950

"Jy is bleek, Hildie. Jy moet meer rus kry."

"Ek probeer." Dis asof sy net nie haar slaap kan inhaal nie, selfs al bly sy naweke in die bed.

Trip kry 'n bevordering. As luitenant verdien hy nou meer geld. "Hou op werk. Bly by die huis. Ons kan nie bekostig dat jy weer siek word nie."

Sy weet dit beter as hy. Hierdie keer gaan sy dalk nie weer uit die hospitaal kom nie. Hildie doen wat Trip sê en bedank. Sy probeer meer rus inkry, maar saam met die groeiende vrees bly die slaap haar ontwyk. As verpleegster ken sy die tekens, selfs al doen sy die laaste paar maande haar bes om hulle te ignoreer. Sy begin weer gewig verloor. Selfs die eenvoudigste huishoudelike takies verg al haar inspanning. Snags word sy natgesweet en koorsig wakker. Toe sy begin hoes, kom daar 'n gelatenheid oor haar en sy sê vir Trip dat sy na Arroyo toe moet teruggaan.

***

## 1951

Hildie is al twee maande by Arroyo en weet dat sy nie beter word nie. Waar sy in haar bed by die sanatorium lê, sien sy al Trip se drome vergaan terwyl haar mediese rekeninge styg. Hy moet 'n kinderoppasser aanstel om na Charlie en Carolyn te kyk totdat hy smiddae van die werk af kom. Hy moet Charlie elke dag skool toe neem, kos maak en wasgoed was, die huis aan die kant hou en die tuin versorg.

Wanneer hy 'n tydjie kan afknyp, los hy die kinders by LaVonne Haversal en bring tyd deur saam met Hildemara.

"As ek doodgaan, Trip, wil ek by die huis doodgaan."

Sy gesig vertrek. "Moenie so praat nie."

Die dokter het hulle albei gewaarsku dat depressie haar grootste vyand gaan wees.

"Ek bid, Trip. Regtig. Ek bly die Here vir antwoorde vra." En daar is net een antwoord wat weer en weer na haar toe kom. Dit voel soos 'n wrede grap.

Trip bid en kom met dieselfde voorstel vorendag as dit wat Hildemara nie hardop wou uitspreek nie.

"Sy sal nie kom nie."

"Sy's jou ma. Dink jy sy sal niks doen om jou te help nie?"

"Ek het vir haar gesê dat ek haar nooit vir hulp sal vra nie."

"Dis die enigste manier waarop jy kan huis toe kom, Hildie. Of gaan jy toelaat dat jou trots in die pad staan?"

"Sy het my nog nooit tevore gehelp nie. Hoekom sou sy dit nou doen, onder hierdie omstandighede?"

"Ons sal nie weet as ons nie vra nie." Hy neem haar hande. "Ek dink sy gaan jou verras."

Trip bel Mamma terwyl Hildemara haar trots met moeite sluk en wonder waarom die Here haar so verneder. Trip dink sy is bang dat Mamma nee gaan sê. Hildie is bang dat Mamma gaan ja sê.

Die oomblik toe Trip vir Mamma sê dat sy siek is en hulp nodig het, weet Hildemara dat sy die bietjie respek wat sy dalk in haar ma se oë gehad het, verloor het. Mamma sal dink dat sy weer 'n lafaard is, te swak om op haar eie bene te staan, te lamlendig om 'n goeie ma en vrou te wees.

As Mamma kom, sal Hildemara in die bed moet lê en kyk hoe haar ma haar verantwoordelikhede oorneem. En Mamma sal dit beter doen as wat Hildemara ooit kon, want Mamma kan alles perfek hanteer. Selfs sonder Pappa funksioneer die plaas soos 'n goed geoliede masjien. Mamma sal die een wees wat vir Charlie vlerke gee. Sy sal Carolyn waarskynlik leer lees voordat sy vier is.

Hildemara sal siek en hulpeloos moet toekyk hoe die lewe wat sy liefhet, deur haar ma oorgeneem word. Selfs die een ding waarin sy uitgeblink het, die een area van haar lewe waarin sy haarself bewys het, sal van haar gestroop word.

Mamma sal die verpleegster word.

# Part Three: Marta

## Chapter 44

Marta stood in the almond orchard beneath the white blossom canopy, the heady scent of spring in the air. Overhead, bees hummed, gathering nectar and spreading pollen, promising a good crop this year. Petals drifted like snowfall around her, covering the sandy soil, reminding her of Switzerland. It wouldn't be long before new-growth-green leaves deepened into darker shades and almonds began to form in tiny nubs.

Niclas used to stand in the orchard just as she did now, looking up through the white-clothed branches to blue sky. He had always been thankful to God for the land, the orchard, the vineyard, crediting the Almighty for providing for his family. He'd never taken anything for granted, not even her.

How she missed him! Marta had thought the years would dull the pain of losing him; and in part, they had, just not in a way she wanted. She couldn't remember every detail of his face, the exact color of his blue eyes. She couldn't remember the feel of his hands upon her, the abandon when they came together as man and wife. She couldn't remember the sound of his voice.

She *could* remember clearly those last weeks when Niclas had suffered so much and tried so hard not to show it because he knew she watched in helpless agony, anger boiling against God. As cancer ate away the hard muscle of his body and left him skin and bones, his faith had grown stronger and more unwavering. "God will not abandon you, Marta." She believed it because she believed Niclas.

Though he hadn't feared death, he hadn't wanted to leave her. When she realized his worry, she had told him she had done very well on her own and she didn't need anyone to take care of her. His eyes had lit with laughter. "Oh, Marta, Marta . . ." When she had wept, he took her hand weakly in his. "You and I are not finished," he whispered, his last words to her before he fell into a coma. She sat beside him until he stopped breathing.

Niclas had been so vigorous; she expected they would grow old together. The children had grown up and gone out on their own. She thought she and Niclas would have many happy years together, alone at last, with limitless time to talk, time together without interruption. Losing him was hard enough without the awful cruelty of how he died. She had told God in no uncertain terms what she thought of that. A good, God-fearing and God-loving man like Niclas shouldn't

suffer like that. She had come out here and stood in this orchard night after night crying out to God in anger, hurling her questions at Him in fury, pounding the ground in her grief.

She hadn't stopped with her complaints over losing Niclas, but had moved on to other pent-up grievances: her father's abuse, her mother's life of illness, her sister's suicide. She dredged up every resentment and hurt.

And God had let her purge herself. In His mercy, He didn't strike her down. Instead, she would feel the whisper of air, the silence, and would feel Him close, leaning in, His presence comforting.

Marta held to Niclas's promise. How she loved that man still. And they would be together again, not because of anything she or Niclas had done in this life to make it so, but because Jesus held them both in the palm of His mighty hand. They were both in Christ and always would be, though she had to endure this physical separation for however long God decided. The Lord had already set the day of her death, and she sensed it would be a long time in coming.

After those first painful weeks following Niclas's death, when she'd finally drained herself dry, she began to see God all around her. Her eyes opened to the beauty of this place, the tenderness of her family and friends who still offered aid and comfort, Hitch and Donna Martin, who shouldered the work. She took long drives to think and talked easily to the Lord while she did. She apologized for her unruly behavior and repented of it. While she had ranted, God had bestowed grace upon her. He had watched over, protected, and cared for her when she was at her worst.

She laughed now, knowing how surprised and pleased Niclas would be if he could see the change in her. She didn't just pray over meals; she prayed all the time. When she opened her eyes in the morning, she asked God to take hold of her day and lead her through it. When she closed them at night, she thanked Him. And in between, she constantly sought His guidance.

Even so, loneliness sometimes snuck up on her as it had today, catching her by the throat, making her heart flutter with an odd sense of panic. She had never been one to cling or depend solely on her husband, but he had become integral to her existence. Niclas now stood in heaven, and she remained captive on this earth. Jesus was with her, but she couldn't see Him; she couldn't touch Him. Never one for hugs and kisses from anyone but Niclas, she missed human touch.

Why this restlessness inside her? Was she floundering or simply

at a crossroads?

She missed so many things, like watching her children or the Summer Bedlam boys hunting for doodlebugs and horned toads or crossing the barnyard on stilts.

She missed the sound of their laughter and shrieks when they played tag or had one of their moonlight snipe hunts. Only the humming of bees filled the silence now. The air, cool and refreshing, stood still.

Marta admonished herself. She had no patience for self-pity in others. She despised it in herself. She had started her journey alone, hadn't she?

*"Look at the birds,* Liebling. *An eagle flies alone,"* Mama had told her so many years ago. All right. Life wasn't fair. So what? Life was difficult. It didn't mean she had to become a grumbling old woman dragging her feet all day. She would mount up with wings as an eagle. She would run and not grow weary; she would walk and not faint. She would fly alone and trust God to keep her spirit airborne. Consider it all joy.

She had plenty of blessings to count. Her children had grown strong and flown off to build their own nests and families. Bernhard and Elizabeth's nursery in Sacramento was doing well. Movie companies pursued Clotilde for her expertise in costume design. Rikka, dreamy and lovely as ever, still had Melvin dangling. How long before that poor young man realized Rikka loved art more than any man?

Only Hildemara still troubled her. Marta had no peace about Hildemara. Her eldest daughter hadn't looked well the last time Marta saw her. And how many months ago had that been? Of course, everything could have changed for the better by now. Of the four, Hildemara shared the least about her life. She kept a distance. Or did Marta just imagine that?

She missed Hildemara terribly, but if her daughter wanted to keep a distance, so be it. Marta wouldn't poke her nose in where it wasn't wanted. At least Hildemara knew how to take care of herself, especially if she'd learned keeping up a house wasn't as important as taking care of her health.

Shaking her head, Marta chuckled, remembering how Hildemara had come home from nursing school and spent her vacation scouring and scrubbing everything in sight—floors, walls, counters, shelves. She'd been obsessed with ridding the farmhouse of germs, as if that

were possible. Marta had been insulted at the time, annoyed past enduring.

Her mind often went back to the day Hildemara had left home. Marta had pushed her hard that day. She'd hurt her girl and made her good and angry. Hildemara had never done anything easily, and stirring her anger had served Marta well in motivating the girl. If she got Hildemara mad enough, her daughter forgot her fear. But now she wondered if the anger lingered, even after the blessings became apparent. She hoped that wasn't true.

Hadn't anger had its way with her as well? Would she have left Steffisburg if she hadn't been raging mad at her father? Or had it been pride?

Her girl had been a godsend during Niclas's illness. Hildemara had proven her great worth during those last difficult months. She'd been knowledgeable, efficient, overflowing with compassion. She hadn't allowed her emotions to rule. She had been like the balm of Gilead in the house. Once or twice, she had stood up to Marta as she guarded her patient. It couldn't have been easy on Hildemara to watch her papa die. Marta was proud of her.

It had been in the weeks that followed Niclas's death that Marta had recognized the growing threat to both her and her daughter. Hildemara had remained to keep her company, to serve, and Marta had drawn comfort from it. She had become used to Hildemara doing for her. God had opened her eyes to it, and she'd been furious. Marta, who had sworn never to become a servant, was making her daughter into one. Her conscience rubbed her raw. Mama had set her free. Would she now cage Hildemara? What did an able-bodied woman need with a nurse? Mortified, she saw how Hildemara cooked and cleaned and fetched and carried. Only the constant activity and search for new things to do revealed the inner turmoil inside her girl. And it had come to Marta like a blow.

*Hildemara doesn't belong here! Cut her loose!*

The more Marta considered the truth of it, the angrier she'd become—at herself, more than Hildemara. It shamed her now to remember how long it had taken to do what was right. She had pushed Hildemara right out the door. It broke her heart, but a good mother teaches her children to fly.

Some, like her sister, Elise, never even spread their wings. Others, like Hildemara, had to be shoved to the edge before they'd take wing. Marta regretted pressing her daughter so hard, but if she hadn't,

where would they be now? She, sitting like the queen of Sheba in her rocker, reading for the pure pleasure of it while Hildemara worked her fingers to the bone on that wretched rag rug? God forbid!

If only she'd been able to send Hildemara off in Mama's gentle way, with words of blessing rather than a lie: *"I don't want you here."*

Marta had often been amazed at the differences between herself and her eldest daughter. Marta had set her mind long ago against ever being anyone's servant. Hildemara made a career of it. Serving others seemed to come naturally to her. Marta had dreaded being pulled home again by Mama's illness and Elise's dependency. Hildemara had come willingly, pouring her heart into caring for her papa—and mama, as it turned out.

Marta's father had clipped her mother's wings and caged her. He'd worked Mama until her health gave out. Had he the opportunity, he would have done the same to Marta. Mama knew it as well as Marta. Marta had fretted constantly, her conscience plaguing her. How could she leave Mama, ill as she was, and go after her dream? How dare she take her freedom at the cost to others she loved so dearly! Mama had understood the guilt that imprisoned Marta and lifted it.

*"You have my blessing, Marta. I give it to you wholeheartedly and without reservation."*

So many years had passed and Marta held fast to those words.

*"You have my love."*

Words had power. Papa's crushed. Mama's lifted and sent her out free to find her way in the world. Perhaps, had Mama known how far from home Marta would go, she might've had second thoughts. Perhaps that had been an added reason for holding Elise so close, inadvertently clipping her wings and making her unable to fly.

Marta had so often been tempted to hold Hildemara as close. Sickly from birth, a tiny, homely baby prone to sickness, Hildemara Rose had torn at Marta's heartstrings. She had wanted to protect and shower love on her girl. What a tragic waste if she'd given in and done it! No, Marta told herself firmly, she would've crippled her. She had done the right thing in stifling those yearnings.

Bernhard, Clotilde, and Rikka had all been born with an independent spirit. Hildemara Rose came into the world dependent. If it were left up to her, Hildemara might still be here, working for Mama, forgetting she had a life of her own to live. Marta hadn't been willing to wait and watch the years pass, or to see an old pattern be

reborn. Mama had done the right thing by her, but the wrong thing for Elise. Marta couldn't allow herself to make the same mistake with Hildemara Rose.

Why was the girl so much on her mind lately? Why couldn't she find any peace about her?

It was time to stop second-guessing whether she had done things right or not. She had done her best by all her children. She had other decisions to make. She had her own life to consider.

As much as she had come to love the orchard and vineyard, this ranch had been Niclas's dream, not hers. She felt restless here. What of her plans set aside so long ago? Was she past the age where she could go back and pursue them? Or had they been too big? She'd wanted to own a hotel. She couldn't care less about that now, but what about getting an education? She sniffed, imagining what people would say if a woman her age showed up for a college lecture. Then again, why should she care what anyone thought about it? Had she ever cared what others said?

Would she be allowed in without a high school diploma? They would undoubtedly want to test her. Let them. She knew more than any eighteen-year-old she had met in a dozen years. Hadn't she read and reread her children's textbooks while they slept?

Maybe she was just being an old fool. Did having a high school diploma matter anymore? She should just get over not having one and be done with it. She could keep going down the shelves in the library, reading one book after another, until she lost her eyesight or dropped dead.

Self-pity again. *Lord, don't let me get into that disgusting habit. And while we're about it, God, I don't know what to do. But it seems an unholy waste of time to stay here and go on as I am. I pay the Martins a fair wage and have more than enough to get by, but I feel . . . What? What do I feel? I don't even know anymore, what I want, why I'm still breathing air. Everything used to be so fixed in my mind.*

Hildemara.

Her mind's eye saw her daughter again. What about her? There was unfinished business between them, but Marta didn't know what to do about it. She wasn't even sure what it was, and she had no intention of apologizing for being hard on her when that hardness had been necessary.

*What about Hildemara, Lord? What're You trying to tell me? Just spell it out!*

“Mrs. Waltert!” Hitch Martin came striding toward her. Niclas had been right about the Okie being a hard, dependable worker. Hitch kept up the place the way Niclas would have wanted, and Marta didn’t mind paying him wages above the going rate. “Donna and me was going to town for supplies and wondered if you’d be needing anything.”

Polite, always respectful, considerate, too, he and Donna never failed to ask, even knowing the answer would always the same. “Not a thing, Hitch.” Marta liked having ready excuses to get in her car and take a drive.

Hitch stood arms akimbo, admiring the trees. “Looks to be a good crop coming, don’t it?” The hives they had set out were busy.

“It does, indeed.” Barring a strong wind or late driving rain to ruin it. The bees were certainly doing their work.

“Someday I hope to have a place of my own like this.” He gave her a quick, shy glance. “In case I haven’t said it lately, Mrs. Waltert, I surely do appreciate you hiring me and letting us use the big house.” Hitch looked more fit than when she’d hired him—plenty of good food, a decent roof over his head, and fewer worries about how he was going to take care of his four children brought change.

“It’s as much to my benefit as yours.” Maybe more so. She had hours to herself these days to do what she pleased, which made her grateful. She remembered what it had been like to live in a drafty tent with four children and only a barn for respites of privacy with her husband. She remembered spending three years slaving through blistering summers and arctic winters for a man who cheated them of their fair share of profits. She swore she’d never treat anyone who worked for her that way. The Martins were good people and she intended to see they did well.

Hitch seemed in no hurry to leave. “Listen to them bees.”

“We’ll have plenty of honey to sell.” She would smoke the hives and steal the honey soon. Donna spun the rich sweetness from the combs and filled and labeled the jars for market.

“Nothing tastier than honey from almond blossoms, ma’am. Oh, by the way, I heared your phone ringing on the way out.”

Probably one of her friends from church needed something cooked for someone sick or bereaved. “They’ll call back.”

Marta and Hitch talked farm business on the walk back to the wide drive. The windmill needed repairs. They’d have to start digging the irrigation ditches soon, get a head start. Now that they had a

bathroom with a shower in the house, the small building with a water tank on top could be converted to something more useful. The barn would need repainting in another year. She could hire extra help if he wanted it for that project. "I don't want to see you up on an extension ladder, Hitch." He laughed and said he'd send one of his sons up to do the high work.

Hitch told her the tractor was acting up again, but he felt sure he could fix it, if he had a few parts. Marta gave him the go-ahead to buy whatever he needed. She always had a list of chores, but he'd begun anticipating her requests and getting the work done before she needed to ask. He was a good man, a good farmer.

After the Martins drove off in their old truck, Marta wandered the place. The fruit trees alongside the big house had grown. She and Donna would be canning peaches and pears together. The plums would make good prunes and jam. Plenty of apples for Donna's growing children and a few neighbor kids to pluck and eat. And there would be lots of oranges and lemons, too.

Now that Donna tended the chickens and rabbits and kept up the vegetable garden, Marta had little work to do. She'd done laundry yesterday and baked bread this morning, enough for herself and the Martins. She could always spend the rest of the afternoon finishing up that five-thousand-piece puzzle Bernhard and Elizabeth had given her for Christmas last year. Bernhard had laughed and said that ought to keep her busy and out of Hitch Martin's hair for a while. She calculated how many hours she'd already spent on it and groaned. All that work for what? To break it up when she finished, put it back in the box, and give it away to someone else with time on their hands.

*God, help me. I do not want to spend my life working puzzles and watching game shows. Time enough for that when I'm really old. At eighty-five or ninety.*

The telephone rang.

Marta let the screen door slam behind her. She answered on the fourth ring.

"It's Trip, Mama."

She knew by his voice he hadn't called with good news. "Hildemara's sick again, isn't she?" She eased herself onto a kitchen chair. Maybe there had been a reason she'd been thinking so much about her eldest daughter lately.

"She's back in the hospital."

"She should start getting better then."

"She's been there two months and no improvement."

*Two months!* "And you're just telling me about it now?"

"Hildie thought she'd be home in a few weeks. She didn't want to worry you. We both hoped . . ." He fell silent again.

Lies, all of it, but Marta could imagine the worry on his face and calmed herself. "How are you managing alone with the children?"

"A neighbor lady takes care of them while I'm at work."

A neighbor lady. Well, wasn't that just grand. Hildemara and Trip would rather have a stranger taking care of their children than call her for help. How had this happened? Marta rested her elbows on the table. Holding the phone in one hand, she rubbed her forehead with the other. She could feel a headache coming on. She'd better speak before she couldn't. "She needs time, I suppose."

"Time." His voice choked up. "All she does is worry about hospital bills and leaving me in debt." He cleared his throat. "She says if she's going to die, she wants to die at home."

Marta felt the heat rise up inside her. So Hildemara had given up again. "You remind her she has a husband and two children to live for. She's not done with this life yet."

"It's worse this time. Wanting to live isn't always enough."

It seemed Hildemara wasn't the only one who had given up. Marta thought of her mother. Had she wanted to live? Or had she given up, too? Had she become so tired of the struggle to hold on to life, even for Elise, that she gave up?

"We could use your help, Mama."

"If you're asking me to come up and help bury her, the answer is no."

He drew in a sharp breath and swore. His tone hardened. "Hildie said you wouldn't help her."

The words stabbed deep. Marta wanted to say she'd helped Hildemara more than the girl would ever understand, but that wouldn't help Trip handle what was happening or make Hildemara get better.

Squaring her shoulders, Marta scraped her chair back and stood. "If my daughter can hold on so tight to old grievances, with God's help, she can hold on to life, too, Trip Arundel."

"I shouldn't have called." He sounded defeated.

"No. You should've called sooner! The trouble is I can't do anything right this minute." She had things to settle, and she'd have to work quickly. She and Hitch Martin had made a gentleman's

agreement. Maybe it was time to put things into writing. She'd need to talk to Hitch first and then a lawyer. She wanted to make certain things were spelled out good and properly so both she and the Martins benefited.

"I'm sorry," Trip mumbled, voice tear-soaked.

Her son-in-law sounded so tired, so out of hope, Marta felt the sorrow rise up in her. Would she lose her daughter after all? Would she have to watch Hildemara suffer as Mama had, gasping for breath, coughing up blood into a handkerchief?

"We're talking now. And we're going to pray hard and get others praying with us. I've got a whole group of women with plenty of time for that kind of work. Come down to Murietta, Trip. I'll have to get busy and sort out a few things here. But you come. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. We can sit under the bay tree and talk about what I can and can't do."

Trip said he'd drive down with the children on Saturday.

* * *

Marta sat down and wrote a list in her journal. First things first. *Talk to Hitch and Donna about taking over the ranch.* Hitch had said today he'd like to have a place of his own someday. Running this place in her absence would move him toward that goal. They'd need a legal contract to protect both of them. Charles Landau had a good reputation as a lawyer. She had accounts at the hardware store and feed and grain. She'd add Hitch to them so he could get what he needed without having to clear everything through her. She needed to copy the ranch maintenance schedule from her journal and give that to Hitch as well, though he seemed to know it already. Niclas had wanted to be sure she knew what needed to be done and when throughout the year.

Marta spent all day thinking over ranch business and things she'd need to get settled. Concerns buzzed like flies in her head, and she swatted them with prayers. Finally exhausted, Marta went to bed, but couldn't sleep. She'd talk to Hitch and Donna first thing in the morning, then go to town, set up an appointment with Charles Landau, and take care of the store accounts. Annoyed, she told herself to let go of it all and get some sleep.

Hildemara hadn't wanted Trip to call. *"Hildie said you wouldn't help her."* Did her daughter really believe that?

Lying in the darkening room, Marta weighed her actions from the

past. She prayed God would help her see through Hildemara's eyes, and as she did, she wondered. *Does Hildemara Rose even know how much I love her?*

If only she'd been a gentler person, like Mama, one given to prayer and trusting in God from the beginning no matter how bad the circumstances. Life with Marta's father had been dire indeed. Nothing pleased the man. And yet, Mama had treated him with loving respect. She worked hard, never complained, never gave in to despair, and continued to love him, even at his worst. Marta saw how she had made her mother's life even more difficult. Hot-tempered, stubborn, willful, she had never been an easy child. She'd fought her father, refusing to be cowed, even when he beat her. How many times had Mama been in the middle, pleading, trying to protect?

Mama had only hurt her once. *"You are more like your father than you are like me."*

Marta had been offended at the time, but she should've listened. She should've been warned! Harsh words, fierce anger, a desire to achieve her goals at all cost—hadn't she inherited all that from Papa? Mama hadn't meant to hurt her. She had only wanted Marta to see her father in another way, without hatred and condemnation.

Did Hildemara look upon her the same way? Did her daughter see her as unbending, never satisfied with Hildemara's efforts, always looking for faults, unfeeling, unable to love? If Hildemara didn't feel she could ask for help, didn't that say it all?

How could such misunderstanding have grown between them?

Yes, Marta conceded, she had hurt her daughter at times, but to make her strong, not to tear her down. Had she been so determined to make Hildemara rise up and fight back that she had become as intractable, cruel, and heartless as her own father? God forbid!

But she saw clearly how she had been harder on Hildemara than the others. She had done it out of love. She had done it to save Hildemara from Elise's fate. She didn't want her girl growing up frightened of the world, hiding away inside a house controlled by a tyrant, utterly dependent on her mother.

And Hildemara hadn't.

Marta had hated her father. She realized now she'd never forgiven him. When he wired for her to come back, she had burned his message and wished him in hell. How dare she hope for forgiveness from Hildemara if she couldn't forgive her own father?

Pain clutched at Marta so fiercely, she sat up and hunched over.

She had never used her fists on Hildemara, or whipped her with a strap until she bled, the way her father had. She never called her ugly or told her she was stupid. She'd never told her she had no right to go to school, that education was wasted on her. She'd never made Hildemara work and then taken away her wages. Despised and rejected, Marta had fought back, lashing out in fury against her father for trying to bury her spirit beneath the avalanche of his own disappointments.

And Mama had held her and whispered words of encouragement. Mama had held her head up so she could breathe. She'd sent Marta away because she knew, if she remained, she'd become exactly like him: discontent, selfish, cruel, blaming others for what hadn't turned out well in his life.

She'd always been Papa's scapegoat.

*As you made him yours.*

Getting up, Marta went to the window and looked out on the moon-cast yard, the closed barn doors, the white-veiled almond trees.

Would she have left Switzerland and set out on her own journey if not for her father? She'd always credited Mama for her freedom, but Papa played a part, too. She'd been the least favored child. Hermann, firstborn son; Elise, so beautiful, like an angel.

She could see now how she had treated her own children differently. She'd taken pride in Bernhard as her firstborn son. Clotilde thrived, possessed from birth of an independent spirit. Nothing would hold that girl down. And Rikka, with her ethereal beauty and childlike delight in God's creation, had been like a star fallen from the heavens, not quite of this world. Rikka knew no fear. She would flit and float through life, delighting in the wonder of it, seeing shadows, but ignoring them.

And where had Hildemara fit in?

Hildemara, the smallest, the least hearty, the most dependent, had struggled from the beginning—to live, to grow, later to find a dream, to build her own life, to thrive. And now, she must struggle to survive. If she didn't have the courage to do that on her own, Marta must find a way to give it to her.

A flash of memory came of Hildemara racing home, terrified after Mr. Kimball had tried to rape her. But it occurred to Marta now, her daughter had kicked free of a grown man stronger than Niclas. She had been smart enough to run. Hildemara had shown real spunk that day, and at other times, too. She'd gone out and gotten herself a job.

She'd said no to college and gone off to nurses' training. She'd followed Trip from one base to another, finding housing in strange cities, making new friends. She'd crossed the country by herself and come home to help Bernhard and Elizabeth hold on to the Musashis' land despite threats and fire and bricks through their windows.

*My daughter has courage, Lord!*

Despite appearances, and though Marta loathed to admit it, she'd always favored Hildemara a little above the others. From the moment her daughter came into the world, Marta had bonded fast to her. *"She looks like her mother,"* Niclas had said, unwittingly setting things in motion. All the cruel words her father had said about her appearance rose up inside her when she saw Hildemara Rose was plain. And like Elise, she was frail.

But she wouldn't stay that way. Marta decided that first frightening week she wouldn't cripple Hildemara Rose the way Mama had crippled Elise.

Now she wondered if she hadn't pushed Hildemara too hard, and in doing so, pushed her away.

*Oh, Lord, can I bring her close again?*

Hildemara had Mama's constitution. And now, it seemed she had Mama's disease. Would she share Mama's fate as well?

*Please, Lord, give me time.*

She covered her face and prayed. *Oh, God, I wish I'd been more like Mama with her and less like Papa. Maybe I could've made Hildemara strong without wounding her. But I can't go back now and undo the past. Hildemara Rose has no faith in me, no understanding. And that's my fault, not hers. Does she understand I'm proud of her and her accomplishments? Does she know me at all?*

*She can.*

Marta lowered her hands, drew back the curtains, and looked up at the stars. "Jesus," she whispered, "will she be willing to meet me halfway?"

*What does that matter?*

Marta bowed her head. It was just her pride butting in again.

Hildemara had worked hard and done well. She'd had her moments of despair when she'd wanted to give up, but she'd grasped hold when hope was offered and rose again. She wasn't Elise. She might be depressed, but she wouldn't give up. Not if Marta had anything to say about it.

Hildemara might be quieter than Bernhard, who thought he

could tackle the world, less self-possessed than fiery Clotilde with her quest for fame and fortune, not as intuitive and gifted as Rikka, who saw the world through angel eyes. Nevertheless, Hildemara had spunk. She had her own special gifts.

Marta lifted her chin again.

*My daughter has a servant's heart that should please You, Lord. Like Your Son, she's meek, but no coward. She might be a broken reed now with the cold wind of death in her face, but You won't allow her spirit to be crushed. You said it and I believe it. But give me time with her, Lord. I beg You. Help me mend my relationship with her. You know how I've fought against being a servant all my life. I confess it. I've always hated the very idea of it!*

A gentle breeze drifted in through the open window, as though God whispered to her. Marta wiped tears from her cheeks.

"Lord," she whispered back, "teach me how to serve my daughter."

* * *

Marta got up early the next morning and prayed. She went out the side door toward the garden, leaving her journal open on the kitchen table. Walking around to the front of the big house, she knocked on the front door. When Donna opened the door, Marta asked to speak to her and Hitch together about something important. They both looked nervous as they invited her to sit at their table and share a cup of fresh coffee. Marta told them about Hildemara and that she had been thinking about the ranch and making some changes. Hitch's expression fell.

Donna gave him a sorry look and then offered a pained smile to Marta. "With your husband passing on and all, and your daughter needing you, it's understandable you'd want to sell."

"I'm not selling. I'd like to offer you a contract to run the place. You tell me what you want. I'll tell you what I need. And we'll have Charles Landau put it all in writing so there will be no question about it."

Hitch's head came up. "You're not selling?"

"That's what I said." She gave Donna a teasing look. "Better see that he cleans his ears." She looked at Hitch again. "It may come to that, but if it does, you'll get first shot at buying it. If you want it, that is."

"We don't have the money," he said glumly.

"Knowing how hard you work, I might even be willing to hold

the paper rather than have some banker come out the winner in the deal." She looked between the two of them. "So?"

"Yes!" Hitch grinned.

"Please," Donna added, face aglow.

That settled, Marta drove to town to take care of the rest of the details.

Then, on impulse, she drove to Merced and went shopping.

* * *

She wrote to Rosie that night and told her about Hildemara.

*I started thinking about Lady Daisy and our afternoons at Kew and tea in the conservatory. I think it's about time I shared some of these experiences with Hildemara Rose. So I went to Merced and looked through all the stores and couldn't find anything as fine as what I wanted.*

*After hours of searching, I was discouraged. Actually, I was annoyed. I ended up in a little shop, but one look around and I was ready to walk out the front door. Fortunately, the proprietor cut me off. Gertrude! Swiss, from Bern! We talked for an hour.*

*I'd completely forgotten why I'd come to Merced in the first place until we both noticed the time. She needed to close the shop, and I needed to drive home to Murietta. Before leaving, I finally got around to telling her what I'd been looking for and why. G went into her back room and came out with an old, dusty box filled with dishes. She said she'd forgotten all about them until that very moment.*

*I am now the proud owner of a Royal Albert Lady Carlyle tea service—four plates, four teacups, and saucers! G also sold me some dainty spoons and forks, well worth every dollar she extracted from me. I will make all the wonderful sweets and savories for Hildemara Rose that I once served to Lady Daisy. I will pour India tea and lace it with cream and conversation.*

*God willing, I will win back my daughter.*

***Marta***

## Hoofstuk 44

Marta staan in die amandelboord onder ’n dak van wit bloeisels, die soet geur van lente in die lug. Die gegons van bye wat besig is om nektar te versamel en stuifmeel te versprei, belowe ’n goeie oes hierdie jaar. Die blomblare wat soos sneeuvlokkies rondom haar dryf en op die sanderige grond gaan lê, herinner haar aan Switserland. Dit sal nie lank wees voordat nuwe groen blare sal verdonker en die amandels klein knoppies sal begin vorm nie.

Niclas het altyd ook so in die boord gestaan en deur die witgeklede takke na die blou lug gekyk. Hy was die Here altyd dankbaar vir die grond, die boord, die wingerd. Hy het God altyd geëer as die Een wat vir sy gesin voorsien het. Hy het niks ooit as vanselfsprekend aanvaar nie, nie eens vir haar nie.

Hoe mis sy hom nie! Marta het gedink die seer van sy dood sal met die jare vervaag; en dit het ’n bietjie, maar nie op die manier wat sy wou hê nie. Sy kan nie elke detail van sy gesig of die presiese kleur van sy blou oë onthou nie. Sy kan nie die gevoel van sy hande op haar onthou, of die oorgawe waarmee hulle as man en vrou bymekaargekom het nie. Sy kan nie sy stem onthou nie.

Wat sy wel onthou, is die laaste weke toe Niclas so gely het. Hy het so hard probeer om dit nie te wys nie, want hy het geweet dat sy hulpeloos en gepynig toegekyk het en dit op die Here sou uithaal. Namate die kanker die harde spiere in sy lyf weggevreet en hom vel en been gelaat het, het sy geloof sterker en meer onwankelbaar geword. “Die Here sal jou nie in die steek laat nie, Marta.” Sy het dit geglo omdat sy Niclas geglo het.

Al was hy nie bang vir die dood nie, wou hy haar nie so los nie. Toe sy dit besef, het sy vir hom gesê dat sy baie goed op haar eie regkom en niemand nodig het om na haar te kyk nie. Sy oë het verhelder en hy het gelag. “Ag, Marta, Marta ... ” Toe sy gehuil het, het hy haar hand swak in syne geneem. “Ek en jy is nog nie klaar nie,” het hy gefluister, sy laaste woorde aan haar voordat hy in ’n koma gegaan het. Sy het by hom gesit totdat hy ophou asemhaal het.

Niclas was so vol lewe; sy het verwag dat hulle saam sou oud word. Die kinders het grootgeword en hulle eie koers ingeslaan. Sy het gedink dat sy en Niclas baie gelukkige jare voor hulle gehad het, dat hulle uiteindelik weer alleen sou wees, mekaar van voor af kon geniet. Om hom te verloor was erg genoeg sonder die aaklige wreedheid van sy dood. Sy het die Here reguit vertel wat sy daarvan dink. ’n Goeie, godvresende man soos Niclas moenie so ly nie. Sy het nag vir nag hiernatoe gekom en in hierdie boord woedend na die Here geroep. Sy het haar vrae woedend na Hom geslinger en in haar smart met haar arms op die grond geslaan.

Sy het nie by haar seer oor Niclas opgehou nie, maar het ander opgekropte griewe gaan opdiep: haar pa se mishandeling, haar ma se siekte, haar suster se selfmoord. Sy het elke ongelukkigheid en pyn bygesleep.

En die Here het toegelaat dat sy haarself suiwer. In sy genade het Hy haar nie met ’n weerligstraal doodgeslaan nie. In plaas daarvan het sy ’n fluistering in die stilte ervaar, het sy Hom naby haar gevoel en uiteindelik troos uit sy teenwoordigheid geput.

Marta hou vas aan Niclas se belofte. Hoe lief is sy nie steeds vir hom nie. Hulle sal weer bymekaar wees, nie oor enigiets wat sy of Niclas in hierdie lewe gedoen het om dit te verseker nie, maar omdat Jesus hulle albei in sy magtige handpalm hou. Hulle was en is al twee vir altyd in Christus, al moet sy hierdie fisiese skeiding vir ’n tyd lank verduur. Die Here het alreeds die dag van haar dood bepaal, en sy het ’n gevoel dat dit nie gou gaan wees nie.

Ná daardie eerste pynlike weke na Niclas se dood, toe sy haar uiteindelik uitgewoed het, het sy die Here oral rondom haar begin sien. Haar oë het oopgegaan vir die skoonheid van die plaas, die teerheid van haar familie en vriende wat steeds hulp en vertroosting gebied het, Hitch en Donna Martin wat die werklas help dra het. Sy het ver ente gaan ry om te dink en dan gemaklik met die Here gesels. Sy het vir haar onhebbelike gedrag om verskoning gevra. Terwyl sy so tekere gegaan het, het die Here haar genade bewys. Hy het haar opgepas en beskerm en bewaar toe sy op haar ergste was.

Sy wil lag as sy dink hoe verbaas en gelukkig Niclas sal wees as hy die verandering in haar kon sien. Sy bid nie net voordat sy eet nie; sy bid voortdurend. Wanneer sy haar oë soggens oopmaak, vra sy die Here om haar dag oor te neem en haar te lei. Wanneer sy hulle snags toemaak, sê sy dankie. En tussendeur is sy gedurig besig om sy leiding te vra.

En tog is daar dae soos vandag wanneer die eensaamheid haar bekruip en aan die keel gryp sodat haar hart met ’n vreemde paniek begin fladder. Sy was nog nooit iemand wat aan haar man vasgeklou het of totaal van hom afhanklik was nie, maar hy was ’n integrale deel van haar bestaan. Niclas is nou in die hemel, en sy is steeds vasgevang op aarde. Jesus is by haar, maar sy kan Hom nie sien nie; sy kan nie aan Hom raak nie. Sy was nooit een vir drukkies of soentjies van enigiemand buiten Niclas nie, en nou mis sy menslike aanraking.

Waarom hierdie rusteloosheid in haar? Spartel sy of is sy eenvoudig by ’n kruispad?

Sy mis soveel dinge, soos om te kyk hoe haar kinders of die somerkamp-seuns kewers en brulpaddas jag en op stelte oor die plaaswerf loop.

Sy mis die geluid van hulle gelag en gegil wanneer hulle aan-aan speel of mekaar in die nag bekruip. Nou is dit net die gegons van die bye wat die stilte verbreek. Die lug, koel en verfrissend, staan stil.

Marta berispe haarself. Sy het geen geduld vir selfbejammering in ander mense nie. Sy verag dit in haarself. Sy het haar reis immers alleen begin, nie waar nie?

“*Kyk na die voëls,* Liebling. *’n Arend vlieg alleen,*” het Mamma soveel jare gelede vir haar gesê. Die lewe is nie regverdig nie. Dit weet sy al lankal. Die lewe is moeilik. Dit beteken nie dat sy ’n klaerige ou vrou moet word wat die hele dag haar voete sleep nie. Sy sal met arendsvlerke vlieg. Sy sal hardloop en nie moeg word nie. Sy sal alleen vlieg en die Here vertrou om haar gees hoog te hou. Dit as louter vreugde beskou.

Sy het heelwat seëninge om te tel. Haar kinders is sterk en het weggevlieg om met hulle eie neste en gesinne te begin. Bernhard en Elizabeth se kwekery in Sacramento vaar goed. Clotilde is gesog onder filmmaatskappye as deskundige in kostuumontwerp. Rikka, steeds so droomverlore en mooi soos altyd, hou Melvin steeds aan ’n lyntjie. Hoe lank nog voordat die arme man gaan besef dat Rikka liewer vir haar kuns as vir enige man is?

Dis net Hildemara waaroor sy haar steeds kwel. Marta het nie vrede oor Hildemara nie. Toe Marta haar laas gesien het, het haar oudste dogter nie goed gelyk nie. En hoeveel maande gelede was dit? Alles kon natuurlik nou al ten goede verander het. Uit die vier kinders, deel Hildemara die minste oor haar lewe. Sy bly op ’n afstand. Of verbeel Marta haar dit net?

Sy verlang verskriklik na Hildemara, maar as haar dogter haar nie

naby wil toelaat nie, moet dit so wees. Marta gaan nie haar neus insteek waar dit nie welkom is nie. Ten minste weet Hildemara hoe om na haarself te kyk, veral as sy geleer het dat ’n skoon huis nie so belangrik soos haar gesondheid is nie.

Marta lag kopskuddend as sy onthou hoe Hildemara as leerlingverpleegster kom kuier het en die hele vakansie alles waarop sy haar hande kon lê, geskrop en geskuur het – vloere, mure, tafels, rakke. Sy was obsessief daaroor om die plaashuis kiemvry te maak, asof dit enigsins moontlik was. Destyds was Marta beledig, buite haarself van ergernis.

Haar gedagtes dwaal dikwels na die dag waarop Hildemara uit die huis is. Marta het hard met haar gewerk. Sy het haar dogter seergemaak en haar goed kwaad gemaak. Dit was vir Hildemara nooit maklik om dinge te doen nie, en om haar kwaad te maak het Marta gehelp om die kind te motiveer. As sy Hildemara kwaad genoeg gekry het, het haar dogter van haar vrees vergeet. Maar nou wonder sy of die woede nog sluimer, selfs nadat dit seën voortgebring het. Sy hoop dit is nie so nie.

Sy is ook deur woede gedryf. Sou sy Steffisburg verlaat het as sy nie so woedend vir haar pa was nie? Of was dit trots?

Sy is maar te dankbaar dat Hildemara daar was tydens Niclas se siekte. Hildemara het haarself in daardie laaste moeilike maande bewys. Sy was kundig, doeltreffend en vol deernis. Sy het haar emosies nie toegelaat om die oorhand te kry nie. Sy was soos die balsem van Gilead in die huis. Een of twee maal het sy en Marta koppe gestamp in haar poging om oor haar pasiënt te waak. Dit kon nie vir Hildemara maklik gewees het om haar Pa te sien doodgaan nie. Marta is trots op haar.

Dit was in die weke na Niclas se dood dat Marta die groeiende gevaar vir haar en haar dogter begin raaksien het. Hildemara het gebly om haar geselskap te hou, om te dien, en Marta het vertroosting daaruit geput. Sy het daaraan gewoond geraak dat Hildemara dinge vir haar doen. Die Here het haar oë daarvoor oopgemaak en sy was woedend. Marta wat gesweer het om nooit ’n bediende te word nie, was besig om haar eie dogter in een te verander. Haar gewete het haar rou gevreet. Mamma het haar vrygelaat. Hoe durf sy nou vir Hildemara gevange hou? Wat soek ’n gesonde vrou met ’n verpleegster? Sy het beskaamd gesien hoe Hildemara kos maak en skoonmaak en al die huishoudelike verantwoordelikhede op haar neem. Dit was Hildemara se konstante aktiwiteit en soeke na nuwe

dinge wat die innerlike worsteling van haar dogter verklap het. En dit het Marta soos 'n vuishou getref.

*Hildemara hoort nie hier nie! Ek moet haar laat gaan!*

Hoe dieper hierdie waarheid by Marta ingesink het, hoe kwater het sy geword – vir haarself meer as vir Hildemara. Sy kry nou nog skaam as sy onthou hoe lank dit haar geneem het om die regte ding te doen. Sy het Hildemara net so by die deur uitgestoot. Dit het haar hart gebreek, maar 'n goeie ma leer haar kinders hoe om te vlieg.

Sommige, soos haar suster Elise, het nooit eens haar vlerke gesprei nie. Ander, soos Hildemara, moet tot op die rand geboender word voordat hulle wegvlieg. Marta is spyt dat sy haar dogter so hard gedruk het, maar waar sou sy nou gewees het as sy dit nie gedoen het nie? Sy wat soos die koningin van Skeba in haar wiegstoel sit en vir die lekkerte lees, en Hildemara wat haar vingers tot op die been werk aan daardie vervloekste lappiesmat. God verhoed dit!

As sy Hildemara maar net op Mamma se sagte manier kon wegstuur, met 'n seëngroet in plaas van 'n leun: "*Ek soek jou nie hier nie.*"

Marta was al dikwels verstom oor die verskille tussen haar en haar oudste dogter. Marta het lank gelede besluit dat sy niemand se bediende sal wees nie. Hildemara het 'n loopbaan daarvan gemaak. Om ander te dien kom natuurlik vir haar. Dit was Marta se grootste vrees dat sy deur Mamma se siekte en Elise se afhanklikheid weer huis toe gedwing sou word. Hildemara het gewillig gekom en haar met hart en siel in die versorging van haar pa – en later ook haar ma – gewerp.

Marta se pa het haar ma se vlerke geknip en haar in 'n hok aangehou. Hy het Mamma laat werk totdat haar gesondheid ingegee het. As hy die geleentheid gehad het, sou hy dieselfde aan Marta gedoen het. Mamma het dit net so goed soos Marta geweet. Marta het gedurig gewroeg en haar gewete het aan haar geknaag. Hoe kon sy Mamma, siek soos sy was, net so los en haar droom najaag? Hoe durf sy haar vryheid ten koste van haar geliefdes aangryp? Mamma het die skuldgevoel verstaan wat Marta gevange gehou het, en haar daarvan bevry.

*"Jy het my seën, Marta. Ek gee dit volkome en onvoorwaardelik."*

Na soveel jaar hou Marta steeds vas aan daardie woorde.

*"Jy het my liefde."*

Woorde het krag. Pappa s'n het verdelg. Mamma s'n het haar opgelig en haar vrygelaat om haar plek in die wêreld te gaan vind. As

Mamma geweet het hoe ver van die huis af Marta sou gaan, sou sy dalk haar bedenkinge gehad het. Dalk was dit deels waarom sy so styf aan Elise vasgehou het, en haar vlerke onbewustelik geknip het sodat sy nooit sou kon vlieg nie.

Marta was so dikwels in die versoeking om Hildemara so vas te hou. As ’n tingerige babatjie wat van kleins af sieklik was, het Hildemara Rose Marta se hartsnare aangeraak. Sy wou die dogtertjie beskerm en haar liefde op haar uitstort. Wat ’n tragiese vermorsing sou dit nie gewees het as sy geswig en dit gedoen het nie? Nee, sê Marta ferm vir haarself, sy sou haar verlam het. Dit was reg van haar om daardie hunkering te onderdruk.

Bernhard, Clotilde en Rikka is almal met ’n onafhanklike gees gebore. Hildemara Rose het afhanklik in die wêreld gekom. As dit van haar afgehang het, sou Hildemara steeds hier vir Marta gewerk het en vergeet het dat sy ’n eie lewe het. Marta was nie bereid om te wag en die jare te sien verbygaan, of om te sien hoe ’n ou patroon weer gebore word nie. Mamma het die regte ding vir Marta gedoen, maar die verkeerde ding vir Elise. Marta kon haarself nie toelaat om dieselfde fout met Hildemara Rose te maak nie.

Hoekom is die kind die laaste tyd so pal in haar gedagtes? Hoekom kan sy nie vrede kry nie?

Dit is tyd om op te hou wonder of sy die regte goed gedoen het of nie. Sy het haar bes met al haar kinders gedoen. Sy moet nou ander besluite neem. Sy moet haar eie lewe in oënskou neem.

So lief as wat sy vir die boord en wingerd geword het, was hierdie plaas Niclas se droom, nie hare nie. Sy voel rusteloos hier. Wat van haar planne wat sy so lank gelede eenkant toe moes skuif? Is sy verby die ouderdom waarop sy kan teruggaan en hulle najaag? Of was hulle te groot? Sy wou haar eie hotel gehad het. Nou gee sy nie meer daarvoor om nie, maar wat van haar droom om te gaan studeer? Sy snuif en kan haar net voorstel wat die mense sal sê as ’n vrou van haar ouderdom vir ’n lesing opdaag. Aan die ander kant, hoekom sal sy omgee wat enigiemand daarvan dink? Het sy al ooit omgegee wat ander mense sê?

Sal sy sonder ’n hoërskooldiploma toegelaat word? Hulle sal haar ongetwyfeld wil toets. En dit staan hulle vry. Sy weet meer as enige agtienjarige wat sy in baie jare ontmoet het. Het sy dan nie haar kinders se handboeke gelees en weer gelees terwyl hulle geslaap het nie?

Dalk is sy sommer net ’n dwase ou vrou. Maak ’n hoërskooldiploma

regtig nog soveel saak? Sy moet nou maar net eens en vir altyd aanvaar dat sy nie een het nie. Sy sal maar daarmee vrede maak om langs die biblioteekrakke af te loop en een na die ander boek te lees totdat sy haar sig verloor en dood neerslaan.

Weer die selfbejammering. *Here, moenie dat ek in hierdie liederlike gewoonte verval nie. En terwyl ons nou praat, Here, ek weet nie wat om te doen nie. Maar dit voel na 'n onheilige vermorsing om hier te bly en net so aan te gaan. Ek betaal die Martins 'n regverdige salaris en het meer as genoeg om aan die lewe te bly, maar ek voel … Wat? Wat voel ek? Ek weet nie eens meer wat ek wil hê, waarom ek nou asemhaal nie. Alles was altyd so netjies in plek.*

Hildemara.

Haar dogter se gesig kom weer by haar op. Wat van haar? Daar is onafgehandelde sake tussen hulle, maar Marta weet nie wat om daaraan te doen nie. Sy is nie eens seker wat dit is nie, en sy is geensins van plan om om verskoning te vra omdat sy so hard was terwyl daardie hardheid noodsaaklik was nie.

*Wat van Hildemara, Here? Wat probeer U vir my sê? Maak dit tog vir my duidelik!*

"Mevrou Waltert!" Hitch Martin kom na haar toe aangestap. Niclas was reg toe hy gesê het dat die man hardwerkend en betroubaar is. Hitch bestuur die plaas soos Niclas sou wou hê, en Marta gee nie om om hom 'n bogemiddelde salaris te betaal nie. "Ek en Donna wil dorp toe gaan en het gewonder of Mevrou enigiets nodig het."

Hy en Donna, hoflik, eerbiedig en altyd bedagsaam, kom vra sonder uitsondering, selfs al weet hulle dat die antwoord altyd dieselfde is. "Niks nie, dankie, Hitch." Marta geniet dit om 'n verskoning te hê om in haar motor te klim.

Hitch staan hande in die sye en kyk bewonderend na die bome. "Lyk of ons 'n mooi oes gaan hê, nè, Mevrou?" Die korwe wat hulle uitgesit het, is 'n bedrywigheid.

"Dit lyk so, ja." Tensy 'n sterk wind of laat reën dit in die wiele ry. Die bye doen beslis hulle werk.

"Eendag hoop ek om 'n plek soos dié van my eie te hê." Hy gee haar 'n vinnige, skaam kyk. "Vir ingeval ek dit lanklaas gesê het, mevrou Waltert, dankie dat u my in diens geneem het en dat ons die groot huis kan gebruik." Hitch lyk frisser as toe sy hom aangestel het – heelwat goeie kos, 'n ordentlike dak oor sy kop en minder sorge oor hoe hy vir sy vier kinders gaan sorg, het die verandering teweeggebring.

"Dit help my net soveel as vir jou." Dalk selfs meer. Sy het deesdae genoeg ure om te doen wat sy wil, en sy is dankbaar daaroor. Sy onthou die lewe in 'n winderige tent met vier kinders en net die skuur vir 'n bietjie privaatheid saam met haar man. Sy onthou hoe dit was om drie jaar van skroeiende somers en yskoue winters vir 'n man te werk wat hulle van hulle regmatige inkomste beroof het. Sy het gesweer dat sy niemand wat vir haar werk, so sal behandel nie. Die Martins is goeie mense en sy is van plan om te sorg dat hulle nie tekorte het nie.

Dit lyk nie asof Hitch haastig is nie. "Hoor net daardie bye."

"Ons gaan volop heuning vir die mark hê." Sy sal die korwe binnekort moet uitrook en die heuning uithaal. Nadat Donna die heuningkoeke getap het, skep sy die heuning in flesse, plak etikette op, en dan gaan dit mark toe.

"Niks so lekker soos heuning van amandelbloeisels nie, Mevrou. O ja, iets anders, op pad uit het ek Mevrou se telefoon hoor lui."

Dis waarskynlik een van haar kerkvriende wat wil vra of sy iets lekkers vir een of ander sieke of bedroefde sal maak. "Hulle sal weer bel."

Op pad terug deur die boord praat Marta en Hitch plaasbesigheid. Die windpomp het herstelwerk nodig. Hulle sal binnekort moet begin om die leivore te grawe; dit sal goed wees om 'n voorsprong te kry. Noudat hulle 'n badkamer met 'n stort in die huis het, kan die klein geboutjie met die watertenk bo-op vir iets nuttigers gebruik word. Die skuur sal oor 'n jaar weer geverf moet word. Sy kan ekstra hulp kry as hy dit sou nodig hê. "Ek wil jou nie doer bo-op die skuifleer sien nie, Hitch." Hy lag en belowe dat hy een van sy seuns sal stuur om die hoë werk te doen.

Hitch sê dat die trekker weer probleme gee, maar hy is seker dat hy dit met die nodige onderdele sal kan regmaak. Marta sê dit staan hom vry om te koop wat hy nodig het. Sy het altyd 'n lys take wat gedoen moet word, maar hy het begin om haar versoeke te antisipeer en die werk te doen voordat sy vra. Hy is 'n goeie man, 'n goeie boer.

Nadat die Martins in hulle ou bakkie weggery het, dwaal Marta deur die plaas. Die vrugtebome langs die groot huis het grootgeword. Sy en Donna sal die perskes en pere so saam-saam inlê. Die pruime sal lekker pruimedante en konfyt maak. Daar is oorgenoeg appels wat Donna se kinders en hulle maats kan pluk en eet. En daar gaan baie lemoene en suurlemoene wees.

Noudat Donna die hoenders en hase versorg en die groentetuin in

stand hou, het Marta nie veel werk om te doen nie. Sy het gister wasgoed gewas en vanoggend brood gebak, genoeg vir haarself en die Martins. Sy kan die res van die middag altyd aan die 5000-stuk-legkaart werk wat Bernhard en Elizabeth haar verlede jaar vir Kersfees gegee het. Bernhard het gelag en gesê dat dit haar vir 'n rukkie uit Hitch Martin se hare sou hou. Sy bereken hoeveel ure sy reeds daaraan spandeer het en kreun. Al daardie werk en waarvoor? Om dit op te breek wanneer sy klaar is, weer in die boks te pak en vir iemand anders te gee wat niks het om te doen nie.

*Here, help my. Ek wil nie vir die res van my lewe legkaart bou en na speletjiesprogramme sit en kyk nie. Ek sal meer as genoeg tyd daarvoor hê wanneer ek eendag regtig oud is. Op 85 of 90.*

Die telefoon lui.

Marta laat die gaasdeur agter haar klap. Sy antwoord op die vierde lui.

"Dit is Trip."

Sy kan aan sy stem hoor dat hy nie goeie nuus het nie. "Dis Hildemara, nè? Is sy weer siek?" Sy gaan sit op 'n kombuisstoel. Dalk is daar 'n rede waarom sy die afgelope tyd so baie aan haar oudste dogter dink.

"Sy's weer in die hospitaal."

"Dan behoort sy te begin beter word."

"Sy is al twee maande daar en daar is nog geen verbetering nie."

*Twee maande!* "En jy sê my nou eers daarvan?"

"Hildie het gedink sy sal binne 'n paar weke by die huis wees. Sy wou nie hê Ma moes bekommerd wees nie. Ons het albei gehoop ... " Hy word weer stil.

Dit is 'n leuen, maar Marta kan haar die kommer op sy gesig voorstel en kalmeer haarself. "Hoe kom jy alleen reg met die kinders?"

"'n Buurvrou kyk na hulle terwyl ek by die werk is."

'n Buurvrou. Nou maar toe, dis nou wonderlik. Hildemara en Trip sal eerder 'n vreemdeling vra om na hulle kinders te kyk as om haar te bel. Hoe het dit gebeur? Marta rus met haar elmboë op die tafel. Met haar een hand hou sy die telefoon vas en met haar ander vryf sy oor haar voorkop. Sy kan 'n hoofpyn voel aankom. Sy beter praat voordat sy nie meer kan nie. "Ek skat sy het seker tyd nodig."

"Tyd." Sy stem breek. "Al wat sy doen, is om haar oor die hospitaalrekeninge en skuld te bekommer." Hy maak keel skoon. "Sy sê dat as sy moet doodgaan, sy by die huis wil doodgaan."

Marta voel hoe die hitte in haar opstoot. Hildemara het dus weer

opgegee. “Herinner haar daaraan dat sy ’n man en twee kinders het om voor te lewe. Sy is nog nie klaar met hierdie lewe nie.”

“Hierdie keer is dit erger. Om te wil lewe is nie altyd genoeg nie.”

Dit blyk dat Hildemara nie die enigste een is wat moed opgegee het nie. Marta dink aan haar ma. Wou sy lewe? Of het sy ook opgegee? Was sy so moeg baklei om aan die lewe vas te hou, selfs ter wille van Elise, dat sy opgegee het?

“Ons kan doen met Mamma se hulp.”

“As jy my vra om te kom en haar te help begrawe, is die antwoord nee.”

Hy trek sy asem skerp in en vloek. Toe hy weer praat, is sy stem hard. “Hildie het gesê Ma sou haar nie help nie.”

Die woorde maak seer. Marta wil sê dat sy Hildemara meer gehelp het as wat die kind ooit sal verstaan, maar dit sal Trip nie help om die situasie te hanteer of Hildemara beter maak nie.

Marta maak haar skouers reguit toe sy haar stoel terugskuif en opstaan. “As my dogter so styf aan ou griewe kan vashou, kan sy met die Here se hulp ook aan die lewe vashou, Trip Arundel.”

“Ek moes nie gebel het nie.” Hy klink verslane.

“Nee. Jy moes al lankal gebel het! Ongelukkig kan ek nie nou dadelik iets doen nie.” Daar is goed wat sy moet afhandel, en sy sal vinnig te werk moet gaan. Sy en Hitch Martin het ’n mondelingse kontrak aangegaan. Dalk is dit nou tyd om dinge op skrif te stel. Sy sal eers met Hitch moet praat, en dan met ’n prokureur. Sy wil seker maak dat alles mooi en duidelik uitgespel word sodat sy en die Martins beide daarby baat.

“Ek’s jammer,” mompel Trip. Sy hoor die trane in sy stem.

Haar skoonseun klink so moeg en so wanhopig dat Marta die hartseer in haar voel opwel. Gaan sy haar dogter uiteindelik tog verloor? Gaan sy moet toekyk hoe Hildemara ly soos wat Mamma gely het, hoe sy na asem hyg en hoes en bloed opbring?

“Ten minste het jy gebel. En ons gaan baie bid en ander mense vra om saam met ons te bid. Ek het ’n hele groep vroue met baie tyd vir daardie soort werk. Kom Murietta toe, Trip. Ek moet besig raak en ’n klomp goed hier uitsorteer. Maar sorg dat jy hiernatoe kom. Hoor jy my?”

“Ja, Ma.”

“Mooi. Ons kan onder die lourierboom sit en praat oor wat ek kan en nie kan doen nie.”

Trip sê dat hy Saterdag met die kinders sal deurry.

Marta gaan sit en maak ’n lys in haar joernaal. Die belangrikste dinge eerste. *Praat met Hitch en Donna oor die plaas*. Hitch het vandag gesê dat hy eendag ’n plek van sy eie wil hê. Om hierdie plaas in haar afwesigheid te bestuur sal hom nader aan daardie doelwit bring. Hulle sal ’n wettige kontrak moet opstel om hulle albei te beskerm. Charles Landau het ’n goeie reputasie as prokureur. Sy het rekeninge by die hardewarewinkel en voer en graan. Sy sal Hitch se naam daarby laat aanbring sodat hy die nodige kan kry sonder dat alles deur haar goedgekeur moet word. Sy sal die instandhoudingsrooster uit haar joernaal moet afskryf en dit ook vir Hitch gee, al lyk dit of hy dit reeds ken. Niclas wou seker maak dat sy weet wat alles wanneer gedurende die jaar gedoen moes word.

Marta se gedagtes is die hele dag besig met sake rondom die plaas en alles wat gereël moet word. Wanneer bekommernisse soos brommers in haar kop kom draai, slaan sy hulle met gebede dood. Toe Marta uiteindelik doodmoeg bed toe gaan, kan sy nie slaap nie. Sy sal môre-oggend heel eerste met Hitch en Donna praat, dorp toe gaan, ’n afspraak met Charles Landau maak en die winkelrekeninge gaan vereffen.

Later sê sy vererg vir haarself dat sy van alles moet vergeet en moet slaap.

Hildemara wou nie hê dat Trip moes bel nie. “*Hildie het gesê Ma sou haar nie help nie*.” Is dit regtig wat haar dogter glo?

Waar Marta in die donker kamer lê, dink sy aan haar optrede uit die verlede. Sy bid dat die Here haar sal help om haar deur Hildemara se oë te sien, en dan wonder sy: *Weet Hildemara Rose ooit hoe lief ek vir haar is?*

As sy maar net ’n sagter mens was, soos Mamma, iemand wat die Here van die begin af vertrou het, maak nie saak hoe sleg die omstandighede nie. Die lewe saam met Marta se pa was inderdaad ellendig. Niks kon hom tevrede stel nie. En tog het Mamma hom met liefdevolle respek behandel. Sy het hard gewerk, nooit gekla nie, nooit aan wanhoop toegegee nie en het vir hom lief gebly, selfs wanneer hy op sy ergste was. Marta besef hoe sy haar ma se lewe nog moeiliker gemaak het. Met haar humeur, hardkoppigheid en moedswilligheid was sy nie ’n maklike kind nie. Sy het met haar pa baklei, geweier om aan hom toe te gee, selfs wanneer hy haar geslaan het. Hoeveel keer het Mamma nie tussenbeide getree om te pleit en te probeer beskerm

nie?

Mamma het haar net een maal seergemaak. "*Jy is meer soos jou pa as soos ek.*"

Destyds het Marta aanstoot geneem, maar sy moes geluister het. Sy moes haar laat waarsku het! Harde woorde, 'n vinnige humeur, 'n begeerte om haar doelwitte ten alle koste te bereik – het sy dit nie alles by haar pa geërf nie? Mamma wou haar nie seermaak nie. Sy wou net hê Marta moes op 'n ander manier na haar pa kyk, sonder haat en veroordeling.

Kyk Hildemara op dieselfde manier na haar? Sien haar dogter haar as onbuigsaam, iemand wat nooit deur Hildemara se pogings tevrede gestel word nie, altyd fout soek, ongevoelig is en nie in staat om lief te hê nie? Die feit dat Hildemara nie voel dat sy vir hulp kan vra nie, sê seker alles.

Hoe kon so 'n misverstand tussen hulle ontstaan het?

Ja, sy moet erken, sy het haar dogter by tye seergemaak, maar dit was om haar sterk te maak, nie af te breek nie. Was sy so vasbeslote om Hildemara te laat opstaan en terugbaklei dat sy net so wreed en harteloos soos haar eie pa geword het? Here, nee!

Maar sy kan duidelik sien dat sy harder met Hildemara as met die ander was. Sy het dit uit liefde gedoen. Sy het dit gedoen om Hildemara van Elise se lot te red. Sy wou nie hê haar dogter moes eendag in 'n huis wat deur 'n tiran beheer word, agter haar ma se rokspante vir die wêreld wegkruip nie.

En Hildemara het nie.

Marta het haar pa gehaat. Sy besef nou dat sy hom nooit vergewe het nie. Toe hy 'n telegram gestuur het dat sy huis toe moes kom, het sy sy boodskap verbrand en hom in haar gedagtes hel toe gestuur. Hoe durf sy hoop dat Hildemara haar sal vergewe as sy nie haar eie pa kan vergewe nie?

Marta het so seer dat sy regop kom en vooroorgeboë sit.

Sy het Hildemara nooit soos haar pa met haar vuiste bygekom of met 'n sweep geslaan totdat sy bloei nie. Sy het nooit vir haar gesê dat sy lelik of dom is nie. Sy het nooit vir haar gesê dat sy nie mag skool toe gaan of dat 'n skoolloopbaan op haar gemors is nie. Sy het Hildemara nooit laat werk en dan haar geld gevat nie. Marta het uit veragting en verwerping terugbaklei en woedend teen haar pa uitgevaar omdat hy probeer het om haar gees onder die rotsstorting van sy eie teleurstellings te begrawe.

En Mamma het haar vasgehou en bemoedigend in haar oor

gefluister. Mamma het haar kop bo gehou sodat sy kon asemhaal. Sy het Marta weggestuur, want sy het geweet dat as sy sou bly, sy presies soos hy sou word: onvergenoegd, selfsugtig, wreed, iemand wat ander sou blameer vir dit wat in sy lewe verkeerd geloop het.

Sy was nog altyd Pappa se sondebok.

*En jy het hom joune gemaak*.

Marta staan op en gaan staan voor die venster. Buitekant val die maanlig helder oor die werf, die skuurdeure, die witgesluierde amandelbome.

Sou sy Switserland verlaat het en haar eie reis aangepak het as dit nie vir haar pa was nie? Sy het haar vryheid altyd aan Mamma toegeskryf, maar Pappa het ook 'n rol gespeel. Sy was die mins geliefde kind. Hermann was die eersgebore seun; Elise was so engelagtig mooi.

Sy kan nou sien hoe sy haar eie kinders verskillend behandel het. Sy was trots op Bernhard as haar oudste seun. Clotilde het floreer, van kleins af geseënd met 'n onafhanklike gees. Niks kan daardie meisie stuit nie. En Rikka, met haar engelagtige skoonheid en kinderlike vreugde in God se skepping, was soos 'n ster wat uit die hemel geval het, nie heeltemal van hierdie wêreld nie. Rikka weet nie wat vrees is nie. Sy sweef en dwarrel deur die lewe. Sy sien die skaduwees, maar ignoreer hulle.

En waar het Hildemara ingepas?

Hildemara, die kleinste, die sieklikste, die afhanklikste, het van die begin af gesukkel – om te lewe, te groei, om later 'n droom te kry, om haar eie lewe te bou, om te floreer. En nou moet sy worstel om te oorleef. As sy nie die moed het om dit op haar eie te doen nie, moet Marta 'n manier kry om dit vir haar te gee.

Sy onthou skielik hoe Hildemara huis toe gehardloop het, histeries nadat meneer Kimball haar probeer verkrag het. Maar nou val dit Marta by dat haar dogter haarself uit die greep van 'n volwasse man sterker as Niclas bevry het. Sy was slim genoeg om te hardloop. Hildemara het daardie dag bewys dat sy vuur het, en dit was nie die enigste keer nie. Sy het uitgegaan en 'n werk gekry. Sy het nee gesê vir universiteit en verpleging gaan studeer. Sy het Trip van die een na die volgende basis gevolg, in vreemde stede huis opgesit en vriende gemaak. Sy het op haar eie huis toe gekom om Bernhard en Elizabeth te help om die Musashi's se grond in stand te hou ondanks dreigemente en brande en bakstene deur die vensters.

*My dogter hét moed, Here!*

Al lyk dit nie so nie en al grief dit Marta om dit te erken, het Hildemara nog altyd ’n dieper plek in haar hart gehad as die ander. Die oomblik toe haar dogtertjie gebore is, het Marta dadelik ’n innige band met haar ervaar. “*Sy lyk soos haar ma,*” het Niclas gesê en onwetend die bal aan die rol gesit. Al die wrede goed wat haar pa oor haar voorkoms gesê het, het na haar toe teruggekom toe sy sien dat Hildemara Rose gewoon was. En dat sy broos was soos Elise.

Maar sy sou nie so bly nie. Marta het daardie eerste angswekkende week besluit dat sy Hildemara Rose nie sou verlam soos Mamma aan Elise gedoen het nie.

Nou wonder sy of sy Hildemara nie te hard gedruk het, en haar in die proses weggestoot het nie.

*O, Here, kan ek haar weer nader aan my bring?*

Hildemara het Mamma se gestel. En nou lyk dit asof sy Mamma se siekte het. Gaan sy Mamma se lot ook deel?

*Asseblief, Here, gee my tyd.*

Sy druk haar gesig in albei haar hande terwyl sy bid. *Ag, Here, ek wens ek was meer soos Mamma met haar en minder soos Pappa. Dalk kon ek Hildemara sterk gemaak het sonder om haar seer te maak. Maar ek kan tog nie nou teruggaan en die verlede ongedaan maak nie. Hildemara glo nie in my nie, sy vertrou my nie. En dit is my skuld, nie hare nie. Besef sy enigsins dat ek trots is op haar en alles wat sy bereik het? Ken sy my enigsins?*

*Sy kan.*

Marta laat sak haar hande, trek die gordyne oop en kyk op na die sterre. “Jesus,” fluister sy, “sal sy bereid wees om my ten minste ’n kans te gee?”

*Maak dit saak?*

Marta laat sak haar kop. Dit was net haar trots wat weer kom inmeng het.

Hildemara het hard gewerk en goed gedoen. Sy het haar oomblikke van wanhoop gehad wanneer sy wou opgee, maar sy het vasgehou wanneer daar hoop was en weer opgestaan. Sy is nie Elise nie. Sy is dalk depressief, maar sy sal nie opgee nie. Nie as Marta enige sê daarin het nie.

Hildemara is dalk stiller as Bernhard wat vir die hele wêreld kans sien, minder selfversekerd as die vurige Clotilde met haar soeke na roem en rykdom, en nie so intuïtief en begaafd soos Rikka wat deur engeloë na die wêreld kyk nie. Nietemin, Hildemara het haar eie vuur. Sy het haar eie spesiale gawes.

Marta kyk op.

*My dogter het ’n diensbare hart wat U behoort te behaag, Here. Soos u Seun is sy sagmoedig, maar nie ’n lafaard nie. Dalk is sy nou ’n geknakte riet met die koue wind van die dood in haar gesig, maar U sal nie toelaat dat haar gees gebreek word nie. U het dit gesê en ek glo dit. Maar gee my tyd by haar, Here. Ek smeek U. Help my om my verhouding met haar heel te maak. U weet hoe ek my lewe lank daarteen baklei het om ’n dienaar te wees. Ek bely dit. Ek het die blote gedagte daaraan nog altyd verag!*

’n Sagte briesie kom deur die oop venster, asof God vir haar fluister. Marta vee die trane van haar wange af.

“Here,” fluister sy terug, “leer my hoe om my dogter te dien.”

***

Marta staan die oggend vroeg op en bid. Sy los haar joernaal oop op die kombuistafel toe sy by die sydeur uitgaan en na die groot huis loop. Toe Donna die voordeur vir haar oopmaak, vra Marta of sy met haar en Hitch oor iets belangrik kan praat. Hulle albei lyk senuweeagtig toe hulle haar nooi om aan tafel te kom sit en haar ’n koppie vars koffie aanbied. Marta vertel hulle van Hildemara, en dat sy aan die plaas gedink het en ’n paar veranderinge wil aanbring. Hitch se gesig val.

Donna gee hom ’n jammerhartige kyk en glimlag moedig vir Marta. “Met meneer Niclas se dood en Mevrou se dogter wat Mevrou nodig het, is dit te verstane dat u wil verkoop.”

“Ek wil nie verkoop nie. Ek wil julle ’n kontrak aanbied om die plaas te bestuur. Julle moet sê wat julle wil hê. Ek sal julle sê wat ek nodig het. En ons kan Charles Landau kry om dit alles op skrif te stel sodat daar nie misverstande is nie.”

Hitch se kop kom op. “Mevrou gaan nie verkoop nie?”

“Dis wat ek gesê het.” Sy gee Donna ’n tergende kyk. “Jy beter kyk dat hy sy ore ordentlik skoonmaak.” Sy kyk weer na Hitch. “Ek sal dalk later wil verkoop, maar as dit gebeur, het julle eerste opsie om te koop. As julle dit wil hê, bygesê.”

“Ons het nie die geld nie,” sê hy mismoedig.

“As jy aanhou werk soos nou, kan ek dit selfs oorweeg om die papiere te hou eerder as om een of ander bankier daaruit te laat wins maak.” Sy kyk van die een na die ander. “Wat dink julle daarvan?”

“Ja!” Hitch grinnik.

“Asseblief.” Donna straal.

Toe dit afgehandel is, gaan Marta dorp toe om die res van haar sake te gaan doen.

Dan besluit sy impulsief om in Merced te gaan inkopies doen.

***

Daardie aand skryf sy vir Rosie en vertel haar van Hildemara.

*Ek het aan lady Daisy begin dink en ons middae in Kew en tee in die glashuis. Ek dink dis hoog tyd dat ek sommige van daardie ervarings met Hildemara Rose deel. Ek het Merced toe gery en in al die winkels gaan kyk, maar nêrens iets gesien wat naastenby is wat ek wou hê nie.*

*Na ’n ure lange soektog was ek moedeloos. Eintlik was ek heel geïrriteerd. Ek het by ’n klein winkeltjie ingeloop, maar ná een kyk was ek gereed om net so om te draai. Gelukkig het die eienares my voorgekeer. Gertrude! Switsers, van Bern! Ons het ’n uur lank gesels.*

*Ek het heeltemal vergeet waarom ek in die eerste plek Merced toe gegaan het totdat ons albei gesien het hoe laat dit is. Sy moes die winkel sluit en ek moes terugry Murietta toe. Voordat ek daar weg is, het ek haar uiteindelik vertel waarna ek gesoek het en waarom. Gertrude het in haar stoorkamer verdwyn en met ’n ou, stowwerige boks vol breekgoed uitgekom. Sy het gesê sy het al heeltemal vergeet dat sy die goed het.*

*Ek is nou die trotse eienares van ’n Royal Albert Lady Carlyle teestel – vier bordjies en vier koppies en pierings! Gertrude het ook ’n paar fyn lepeltjies en vurkies aan my verkoop, en elke dollar werd wat ek daarvoor betaal het. Ek sal al die wonderlike soet en sout lekkernye vir Hildemara maak wat ek eens vir lady Daisy bedien het. Ek sal Indiese tee skink en dit met room voorsit en met my kind gesels.*

*As die Here wil, sal ek my dogter terugwen.*

## A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Since I became a Christian, my stories have begun with struggles I'm having in my own faith walk, or issues that I haven't worked out. That's how this two-book series started. I wanted to explore what caused the rift between my grandma and my mom during the last years of my grandmother's life. Was it a simple misunderstanding that they never had time to work out? or something deeper that had grown over the years?

Many of the events of this story were inspired by family history that I researched and events I read about in my mother's journals or experienced in my own life. For instance, when I was three, my mother had tuberculosis, just like Hildie did. Dad brought her home from the sanatorium and Grandma Wulff came to live with us and help out. It was difficult for everyone. A child doesn't understand communicable disease. For a long time, I didn't think my mother loved me. She never held or kissed me. She kept her distance to protect her children, but it took years before I understood what felt like rejection was actually evidence of sacrificial love.

While thinking over the past, my husband, Rick, and I decided to take a trip to Switzerland, my grandmother's homeland. Several years earlier, we had gone on a heritage trip to Sweden to meet many of Rick's relatives on his mother's side. I knew I wouldn't have the same opportunity in Switzerland, but wanted to see the countryside with which my grandmother would have been familiar. We visited Bern, where my grandmother went to housekeeping school, and Interlaken, where she worked in a hotel restaurant. When I mentioned to the tour guide that my grandmother had come from the small town of Steffisburg near Thun, she and the bus driver decided to surprise us. Taking an alternate route, they drove into Steffisburg and parked across the street from the centuries-old Lutheran church my grandmother's family must have attended. Rick and I stood in front of the Steffisburg map for a picture before wandering the church grounds and sitting in the sanctuary. We walked up and down the main street, taking lots of pictures. It was a very precious moment for me. On the way out of town, we caught a glimpse of Thun Castle, another place my grandmother mentioned.




Steffisburg, Switzerland

Going through family pictures, I came across several of my mom and her siblings. The one above is my favorite. Mom is second from the left, giggling. Sig was the eldest, then came Mom, Margaret, and Elsie. The picture was taken on the farm in the Central Valley where Grandma and Grandpa had almond trees and grapevines. They dried grapes to make raisins. When my brother and I were young, we often spent a few weeks every summer on the farm, romping and playing and swimming in the irrigation ditches that ran along the back side of the property.



The Wulff siblings

Mom went away to Fresno for nurses' training, then worked at Alta Bates Hospital in Berkeley. My father worked part-time as an orderly. He told me with some amusement that he would go to Mom's ward and ask for an aspirin. Nurses were not to date orderlies, but Dad eventually won Mom over. Not long after they were married, he was called off to war and served as a medic in the European theater. He was in the third wave into Normandy and fought in Germany during the final days of World War II.



My parents enjoyed camping and wanted my brother and me to

see as much of our country as possible. Every year, they saved vacation time and took us off on a trip to visit as many national parks as they could squeeze into two weeks. They often invited Grandma Wulff to come along. When my brother and I would doze in the backseat, Grandma or Mom would prod us. "Wake up, sleepyhead. Look out the window! You may never see this part of the country again." Every few years, we made the trip from Pleasanton, California, back to Colorado Springs, my father's hometown, to visit Grandma and Grandpa King. The photo above is one of the rare pictures of my family with both of my grandmothers. Unfortunately, Grandma King died when I was six.



King family vacation; "Marta" on right

I am blessed to have many wonderful family memories, many of which include Grandma Wulff. I knew there were times of stress and tension between my parents and Grandma, but all families have them. Most work through them. Sometimes minor disagreements can escalate when things aren't resolved.

No one but God can see into the human heart. We can't even fully see into our own. My mother and my grandmother were both strong Christians. They both served others all their lives. Both were admirable women of strong character whom I loved dearly. I still love them and miss them both. I choose to believe my grandmother forgave my mom at the end for whatever hurt lay between them. I choose to believe she simply did not have the time or voice to say it. I know my mother loved her to the end of her own life.

This book has been a three-year quest to feel at peace about the hurt between Mom and Grandma, the possible causes, the ways they might have misunderstood one another, how they might have been reconciled. Jesus teaches us to love one another, but sometimes love doesn't come packed the way we want. Sometimes fear has to be set aside so we can share the past hurts that have shaped our lives, so we can dwell in freedom with one another. And sometimes we don't recognize love when it is offered.

Someday when I pass from this life to the next, I hope Mom and

Grandma will both be standing with Jesus and welcoming me home—just as I will be waiting when my own beloved daughter arrives—and her daughter after her and all the generations yet to come.

*Francine Rivers*

## Van die outeur

Liewe Leser

Vandat ek ’n Christen geword het, word my stories gebore uit worstelinge wat ek op my eie geloofspad het, of kwessies wat ek nog nie uitsorteer het nie. Dis hoe hierdie twee-boek-reeks begin het. Ek wou uitvind wat die kloof tussen my ouma en my ma gedurende die laaste jare van my ouma se lewe veroorsaak het. Was dit ’n eenvoudige misverstand wat hulle nooit tyd gehad het om uit die weg te ruim nie of iets diepers wat deur die jare erger geword het?

Baie van die gebeure van hierdie verhaal is geïnspireer deur ons familiegeskiedenis wat ek nagevors het en gebeure waarvan ek in my ma se dagboeke gelees het of in my eie lewe ervaar het. Toe ek drie was, het my ma byvoorbeeld tuberkulose gehad, nes Hildie. Pa het haar van die sanatorium af gebring en Ouma Wulff het by ons kom bly om te help. Dit was vir ons almal moeilik. ’n Kind verstaan nie oordraagbare siektes nie. Vir ’n lang tyd het ek gedink dat my ma nie vir my lief is nie. Sy het my nooit vasgehou of gesoen nie. Sy het op ’n afstand gebly om haar kinders te beskerm, maar dit het jare geduur voor ek verstaan het dat dit wat soos verwerping gevoel het, eintlik ’n bewys van haar opofferende liefde was.

Terwyl ek so met die verlede besig was, het ek en my man, Rick, besluit om Switserland te gaan besoek waar my ouma gebore is.

’n Paar jaar vroeër was ons op besoek in Swede en het ons baie van Rick se familielede aan sy ma se kant ontmoet. Ek het geweet dat ek nie dieselfde geleentheid in Switserland sou hê nie, maar wou die plekke sien waarmee my ouma bekend was. Ons was in Bern waar my ouma ’n huishoudkundeskool bygewoon het, en Interlaken waar sy in ’n hotelrestaurant gewerk het. Toe ek vir die toergids noem dat my ouma uit die klein dorpie Steffisburg naby Thun kom, het sy en die

busbestuurder besluit om ons te verras. Hulle het ’n alternatiewe roete gevolg en in Steffisburg oorkant die eeue oue Lutherse kerk parkeer waarheen my ouma-hulle heel waarskynlik gegaan het. Nadat ek en Rick ’n foto van ons voor die Steffisburg-kaart laat neem het, het ons deur die kerkterrein gedwaal en in die kerk gaan sit. Ons het op en af deur die hoofstraat geloop en baie foto’s geneem. Dis oomblikke wat ek vir altyd sal bewaar. Op pad uit het ons ’n kykie van die Thun-kasteel gekry, nog ’n plek waarvan my ouma gepraat het.

Terwyl ek deur my familiefoto’s gegaan het, het ek op ’n paar van my ma en haar broers en susters afgekom. Die een op die volgende bladsy is my gunsteling. Mamma is tweede van links, die enetjie wat lag. Sig is die oudste, dan kom Mamma, Margaret en Elsie. Die foto is op die plaas in die Central Valley geneem waar Ouma en Oupa amandelbome en wingerde gehad het.

Hulle het druiwe gedroog om rosyntjies gemaak. Toe ek en my broer klein was, het ons elke somer ’n paar weke op die plaas deurgebring waar ons na hartelus rondgehardloop en gespeel en in die leivore op die grens van die plaas geswem het.

Ma het haar verpleegopleiding in Fresno ontvang en het toe by die Alta Bates Hospitaal in Berkeley gewerk. My pa het deeltyds as ’n hospitaalportier gewerk. Hy het my geamuseerd vertel dat hy na Mamma se saal toe sou gaan om vir hoofpynpille te vra. Verpleegsters het nie met portiere uitgegaan nie, maar Pa het Ma uiteindelik oorgehaal. Kort na hulle huwelik is hy opgeroep en het hy as paramedikus in Europa gedien. Hy was in Normandië en het gedurende die laaste dae van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog in Duitsland geveg.

My ouers het graag gekamp en wou hê dat ek en my broer soveel moontlik van ons land te siene kry. Hulle het elke jaar hulle verlof gespaar en dan het ons soveel moontlik nasionale parke in twee weke besoek. Hulle het Ouma Wulff dikwels saamgenooi. Wanneer ek en my broer op die agtersitplek aan die slaap raak, sou Mamma of Ouma ons wakker skud. “Wakker word, slaapkous. Kyk deur die venster! Jy gaan hierdie deel van die land dalk nooit weer sien nie.” Ons het elke paar jaar die motor gelaai en van Pleasanton, Kalifornië, na Colorado Springs, my pa se tuisdorp, gery om by Ouma en Oupa King te gaan kuier. Hier is een van die skaars foto’s van ons gesin met albei oumas. Ongelukkig is Ouma King oorlede toe ek ses was.

Ek is geseënd met heelwat familieverhale, waarvan baie Ouma Wulff insluit. Ek het geweet dat daar tye van spanning tussen my

ouers en Ouma was, maar dit kom algemeen in families voor. Die meeste mense werk daardeur. Soms gebeur dit dat onbenullige verskille eskaleer wanneer sake nie uitgepraat word nie.

God is die enigste een wat ons harte ken. Ons kan nie eens behoorlik in ons eie sien nie. My ma en my ouma was albei sterk Christene. Hulle albei het hulle hele lewe lank ander mense gedien. Albei was bewonderenswaardige vroue wat ek baie liefgehad het. Ek is steeds lief vir hulle en verlang na hulle albei. Ek kies om te glo dat my ouma my ma aan die einde vergewe het vir die seer wat daar tussen hulle was. Ek kies om te glo dat sy eenvoudig nie die tyd of die stem gehad het om dit te sê nie. Ek weet my ma het haar tot aan die einde van haar lewe liefgehad.

Hierdie boek was 'n drie jaar lange soeke na vrede oor die seer tussen Mamma en Ouma, die moontlike oorsake, die maniere waarop hulle mekaar dalk misverstaan het, hoe hulle versoening kon vind. Jesus leer ons om mekaar lief te hê, maar soms kom die liefde nie verpak soos ons dit wil hê nie. Soms moet ons ons vrees opsy skuif sodat ons die seerkry wat ons lewe gevorm het, kan deel, sodat ons in vryheid met mekaar kan omgaan. En soms herken ons nie liefde wanneer dit aangebied word nie.

Wanneer ek eendag van hierdie lewe na die volgende oorgaan, hoop ek dat Mamma en Ouma albei by Jesus sal staan om my tuis te verwelkom – nes ek vir my eie geliefde dogter, en haar dogter ná haar en al die komende geslagte sal wag.

***Francine Rivers***

# Foto's




*Steffisburg, Switserland*



*Die Wulff-tweeling*



*Francine se ouers, die Kings*



*’n King-familievakansie; “Marta” is op regterhand*

## Discussion Guide

1. Marta certainly had a difficult childhood. What factors shaped her the most, for better or worse? How do those influences shape the woman she becomes?

2. How does Marta's relationship with her father shape her early beliefs about God and His expectations? How is it different from the way Mama sees God? What seems to make the biggest impression on the way Marta views God? Does that change throughout the story? If so, what causes that change?

3. At the end of chapter 4, Marta's mother gave her a blessing when she left home to make her way in the world. In what ways, verbal or otherwise, did your parents give you their blessing? If they didn't, what do you wish they had said to you? In what ways did you—or do you hope to someday—do the same for your own children?

4. It has been said that women often marry a version of their father. How is Niclas like and unlike Marta's father? In what ways is Niclas both passive and aggressive? Marta sometimes seems to harbor resentment toward Niclas. Is that fair?

5. Marta has a hard time trusting Niclas because of the way her father treated her mother. How do you think that makes Niclas feel? In what ways—good or bad—has your family of origin affected your marriage or close friendships?

6. Niclas asks Marta to sell the boardinghouse she bought as the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Is that an appropriate request? What do you think of the way Niclas makes the decision and communicates it to Marta? If you were Marta, what would you have done in that situation? Have you faced a similar decision in your marriage or family?

7. Marta sometimes makes it difficult for Niclas to be the head of their household. Does Marta view herself as a helpmate to Niclas? Do you think he sees her in that way? How is he able to love Marta despite her sometimes-prickly nature?

8. Why does Marta never tell Niclas—or anyone else in her family—that she loves them? How does Marta best show and receive love?

9. In many ways, Marta is like the woman described in Proverbs 31. Which of the qualities described in that passage do

you see in her? Which ones is she missing?

10. After rescuing Elise from the Meyers in chapter 5, Marta tells her friend, “I swear before God, Rosie, if I’m ever fortunate enough to have a daughter, I’ll make sure she’s strong enough to stand up for herself!” How do Marta’s family dynamics come into play later in life when she has children of her own?

11. Marta loves Hildemara deeply. Yet of all her children, Hildemara probably feels the least loved. Why is that? Is treating children *differently* the same as *favoring* one over another? What challenges make it difficult to raise all the kids in a family exactly the same? How hard should parents strive to do so?

12. Have you ever felt, as Hildemara did, that others in your family have unfairly received a greater share of love, financial provision, or some other valuable resource? How did you respond? What advice would you give someone in this situation?

13. After Hildemara’s incident with her teacher Mrs. Ransom, Hildemara tells her father that she prayed and prayed, but her prayers didn’t change the situation. Niclas replies, “Prayers changed you, Hildemara.” What does he mean by that? Have you ever had a similar experience?

14. Why is Marta so averse to Hildemara’s decision to attend nursing school? Does she ever change her mind about Hildemara’s chosen profession?

15. For several months, Hildemara keeps Trip at arm’s length. Why do you think she does that? What makes her finally admit her love for him?

16. Trip, like many men of his generation, has tragic, life-altering experiences in World War II. Have you heard stories from or about men in your own family who were similarly affected? Have any of your loved ones been involved in more recent wars? How has war affected your family?

17. Tuberculosis is much rarer today than it was in Marta’s and Hildemara’s lifetimes. Yet life-threatening and chronic illnesses have never been more prevalent. How has your family been impacted by serious illness? Discuss the strain illness can place on family dynamics, regardless of the “relational health” a family may have at the outset.

18. If you could change one thing about the way you were parented, what would it be? And if you have children, is there anything you wish you could change about the way you’ve

parented them? What is one step you could take in that direction?
19. At the end of this book Marta is determined, with God's help, to make a fresh start with Hildemara. Do you think she will succeed? Why or why not? How do you think Hildemara will respond? Is there hope for this relationship?
20. If you could sit down with Marta and Hildemara, what would you like to tell each of them? Is there someone in your family you need to talk with about mistakes or misperceptions from the past that are still affecting you today? If you have unresolved issues with a loved one who has passed away, who might you talk with to try to reach some closure for yourself?

## Besprekingsgids

1. Marta het 'n moeilike kinderlewe gehad. Watter faktore het die grootste invloed op haar gehad, ten goede of kwade? Hoe het daardie invloede die vrou gevorm wat sy sou word?
2. Hoe vorm Marta se verhouding met haar pa haar vroeë persepsie van God en sy verwagtings? Hoe verskil dit van die manier waarop Mamma na die Here kyk? Wat maak die grootste indruk op die manier waarop Marta na die Here kyk? Verander dit deur die loop van die verhaal? Indien wel, wat veroorsaak die verandering?
3. Aan die einde van hoofstuk 4 gee Marta se ma haar 'n seën toe sy van die huis af weggaan. Op watter maniere, verbaal of andersins, het jou ouers jou hulle seën gegee? As hulle nie het nie, wat wens jy het hulle vir jou gesê? Op watter maniere het jy – of wil jy graag eendag – dieselfde vir jou kinders doen?
4. Daar word gesê dat vroue dikwels met 'n weergawe van hulle pa trou. Watter ooreenkomste en verskille is daar tussen Niclas en Marta se pa? In watter opsigte is Niclas beide passief en aggressief? Dit wil soms lyk asof Marta wrokkig teenoor hom voel. Is

dit regverdig?

5. Marta sukkel om Niclas te vertrou vanweë die manier waarop haar pa haar ma behandel het. Hoe dink jy laat dit Niclas voel? Op watter maniere – goed of sleg – het jou gesin van herkoms jou huwelik of naby verhoudings beïnvloed?
6. Niclas vra Marta om die losieshuis te verkoop wat sy as die vervulling van ’n lewenslange droom gekoop het. Is dit ’n billike versoek? Wat dink jy van die manier waarop Niclas die besluite neem en dit aan Marta kommunikeer? Wat sou jy in daardie situasie gedoen het as jy Marta was? Het jy al voor ’n soortgelyke besluit in jou huwelik of gesin te staan gekom?
7. Marta maak dit vir Niclas soms moeilik om die hoof van hulle huis te wees. Beskou Marta haarself as ’n helper vir Niclas? Dink jy hy sien haar so? Hoe kry hy dit reg om vir Marta lief te wees ten spyte van haar soms prikkelbare geaardheid?
8. Waarom sê Marta nooit vir Niclas – of enigiemand anders in haar gesin – dat sy vir hulle lief is nie? Wat is haar beste manier van liefde bewys en ontvang?
9. Marta is in baie opsigte soos die vrou wat in Spreuke 31 beskryf word. Watter van die kwaliteite in daardie gedeelte sien jy in haar? Waarin skiet sy te kort?
10. Nadat sy Elise in hoofstuk 5 van die Meyers gered het, sê Marta vir haar vriendin: “Ek sweer voor die Here, Rosie. As ek ooit gelukkig genoeg is om ’n dogter te hê, sal ek seker maak dat sy sterk genoeg is om vir haarself op te staan!” Watter rol speel Marta se gesinsdinamika wanneer sy later in haar lewe haar eie kinders het?
11. Marta het Hildemara innig lief. En tog voel Hildemara waarskynlik die minste geliefd van al haar kinders. Waarom is dit so? Mense behandel hulle kinders nie altyd eenders nie. Is dit dieselfde as om die een bo die ander voor te trek? Watter uitdagings maak dit moeilik om al die kinders in ’n

gesin presies dieselfde groot te maak?

12. Het jy al ooit soos Hildemara gevoel dat ander gesinslede onredelik ’n groter porsie liefde, finansiële voorsiening of een of ander waardevolle hulpmiddel ontvang? Hoe het jy reageer? Wat sal jou raad vir iemand in hierdie situasie wees?
13. Na Hildemara se insident met haar onderwyseres, mevrou Ransom, sê Hildemara vir haar pa dat sy bid en bid, maar dat haar gebede nie die situasie verander het nie. Niclas antwoord: “Jou gebede het jou verander, Hildemara.” Wat bedoel hy daarmee? Het jy al ooit ’n soortgelyke ervaring gehad?
14. Waarom is Marta gekant teen Hildemara se besluit om ’n verpleegster te word? Verander sy ooit van mening oor Hildemara se loopbaan?
15. Vir ’n hele paar maande laat Hildemara Trip nie naby haar toe nie. Waarom dink jy doen sy dit? Wat maak dat sy uiteindelik haar liefde vir hom erken?
16. Trip, soos baie mans uit sy generasie, het tragiese, lewensveranderende ervarings in die Tweede Wêreldoorlog gehad. Is daar mans in jou eie familie wat op dieselfde manier geraak is? Was enige van jou geliefdes in meer onlangse oorloë betrokke? Hoe is julle gesin deur oorlog beïnvloed?
17. Tuberkulose is vandag baie meer seldsaam as in Marta en Hildemara se leeftyd. Tog het lewensbedreigende, chroniese siektes nog nooit meer algemeen as vandag voorgekom nie. Hoe is jou familie al deur ernstige siekte geraak? Bespreek die spanning wat siekte op ’n gesin kan plaas, ondanks die “gesonde verhoudings” wat daar oorspronklik was.
18. As jy een ding kan verander aan die manier waarop jy grootgemaak is, wat sal dit wees? En as jy kinders het, is daar enigiets wat jy wens jy kon verander aan die manier waarop jy hulle grootgemaak het? Noem een stap wat jy in daardie rigting kan gee.
19. Aan die einde van hierdie boek is Marta vasbeslote om met die Here se hulp van voor af te begin met Hildemara. Dink jy sy sal daarin slaag? Waarom of

waarom nie? Hoe dink jy sal Hildemara reageer? Is daar hoop vir hierdie verhouding?

20. Wat sou jy onderskeidelik vir Marta en Hildemara sê as jy met hulle kon sit en gesels? Is daar iemand in jou familie met wie jy moet praat oor foute of wanpersepsies uit die verlede wat jou vandag nog raak?

## About the Author

Francine Rivers began her literary career at the University of Nevada, Reno, where she graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in English and journalism. From 1976 to 1985, she had a successful writing career in the general market, and her books were highly acclaimed by readers and reviewers. Although raised in a religious home, Francine did not truly encounter Christ until later in life, when she was already a wife, a mother of three, and an established romance novelist.

Shortly after becoming a born-again Christian in 1986, Francine wrote *Redeeming Love* as her statement of faith. First published by Bantam Books, and then rereleased by Multnomah Publishers in the mid-1990s, this retelling of the biblical story of Gomer and Hosea, set during the time of the California Gold Rush, is now considered by many to be a classic work of Christian fiction. *Redeeming Love* continues to be one of the Christian Booksellers Association's top-selling titles, and it has held a spot on the Christian best-seller list for nearly a decade.

Since *Redeeming Love*, Francine has published numerous novels with Christian themes—all best sellers—and she has continued to win both industry acclaim and reader loyalty around the globe. Her Christian novels have been awarded or nominated for numerous honors, including the RITA Award, the Christy Award, the ECPA Gold Medallion, and the Holt Medallion in Honor of Outstanding Literary Talent. In 1997, after winning her third RITA Award for inspirational fiction, Francine was inducted into the Romance Writers of America's Hall of Fame. Francine's novels have been translated into more than twenty different languages, and she enjoys best-seller status in many foreign countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and South Africa.

Francine and her husband, Rick, live in northern California and enjoy time spent with their three grown children and taking every opportunity to spoil their grandchildren. Francine uses her writing to draw closer to the Lord, and she desires that through her work she might worship and praise Jesus for all He has done and is doing in her life.

Visit her Web site at www.francinerivers.com.

## Meer oor die outeur

Francine Rivers begin haar literêre loopbaan aan die University Nevada, Reno, waar sy ’n BA-graad in Engels en Joernalistiek behaal. Van 1976 tot 1985 het sy ’n suksesvolle loopbaan in die sekulêre mark gevolg waar haar boeke deur lesers en resensente hoog aangeskryf is. Alhoewel sy in ’n godsdienstige huis grootgeword het, het Francine Christus eers later in haar lewe ontmoet toe sy reeds ’n getroude vrou, ma van drie en ’n gevestigde skrywer van liefdesverhale was.

Kort nadat sy in 1986 ’n wedergebore Christen geword het, skryf Francine *Redeeming Love* as ’n verklaring van haar geloof. Die roman, wat eers deur Bantam Books gepubliseer is en in die middel negentigerjare deur Multnomah Publishers uitgegee is, is ’n moderne weergawe van die Bybelse verhaal van Gomer en Hosea en speel af teen die agtergrond van die goudstormloop in Kalifornië. *Redeeming Love* word deur baie mense as ’n klassieke Christelike werk beskou, en is steeds een van die Christian Booksellers Association se topverkopers. Verder beklee die boek al vir bykans ’n dekade ’n plek op die Christelike topverkoperlys.

Sedertdien het Francine verskeie romans met Christelike temas – almal topverkopers – gepubliseer en die lof van skrywerskringe en lojaliteit van lesers wêreldwyd ingepalm. Haar Christelike romans word benoem vir, en ontvang verskeie toekennings, insluitend die RITA Award, die Christy Award, die ECPA Gold Medallion, en die Holt Medallion vir uitstaande literêre talent. Nadat sy haar derde RITA Award vir inspirerende fiksie ontvang het, word Francine in 1997 by die Romance Writers of America Hall of Fame ingelyf. Francine se boeke word in meer as 20 verskillende tale vertaal, en sy geniet die status as topverkoper in baie lande, insluitend Duitsland, Nederland en Suid-Afrika.

Francine en haar man, Rick, woon in die noorde van Kalifornië en geniet die tyd wat hulle saam met hulle drie volwasse kinders deurbring en benut elke geleentheid om hulle kleinkinders te bederf. Francine gebruik haar skryfwerk om nader aan die Here te groei, en dit is haar begeerte om Jesus deur haar werk te loof en te prys vir alles wat Hy in haar lewe gedoen het.

Besoek haar webtuiste by www.francinerivers.com.